

## Geek on Fleek by cali-chan (girls\_are\_weird)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Alternate Universe - College/University, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Alternate Universe - No Powers, F/M, Fluff, Jim Hopper's Home for Mistreated Little Girls, Mike is the biggest sap we all know this, Online Dating, Romance, Well... kind of?, oh the fluff

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**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven | Jane Hopper & Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Lucas Sinclair, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Mike Wheeler, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper

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**Summary:**

"You are never going to find someone if you just sit there and wait for Mr. Right to come in through the door, Jane. Sometimes you have to take the initiative, you know? Put yourself out there. Grab the bull by the horns." PG-13, romance/fluff, modern-day AU, Mike/Eleven.

# 1. Eggo-shaped Cookies

## Notes for the Chapter:

This is a modern-day AU, and thus completely unrelated to any of my previous stories in the [Quiet Moments](#) series. Just wanted to make sure that's clear so there's no confusion. Also, El's powers, as well as any Upside Down elements, do not exist in this story.

El was just finishing frosting the cookies when Max walked out of her room to look at herself in the full-length mirror they had installed in the living room so they could share. She watched from the kitchen as her best friend and roommate pushed her hair this way and that, adjusting her blouse and making sure her makeup looked okay. It was mildly amusing to her because Max usually didn't like dressing up— she was more of a tomboy, really— but whenever she did, it turned into a total production.

The redhead finally turned to her with a huff. "Okay, be brutally honest: Is this too much?" she asked, gesturing to herself from her head to her toes.

"You look great," El told her sincerely before bending down to put the cookie sheet on the lower tray of the fridge. "Are you going out? I thought you said you weren't going to do the dating site thing anymore." Over the past few months Max had been on a few dates with guys she met through a couple of the major dating websites, but so far she hadn't really clicked with any of them, which is why, after listening to endless complaints, El had thought she was giving up on meeting people online.

Max sighed as if frustrated. "No, I said all the guys I've been meeting on dating sites are douchebags," she started, which honestly didn't sound like much of a clarification to El, but then she continued speaking. "So I've decided that from now on, I'm only going to date nerds."

Well, that was... unexpected, El thought as she closed the refrigerator door, now a little bit worried that Max wasn't being careful enough. El had never really liked the whole "dating site" idea all that much—people could say *anything* in those profiles, and what if one of her dates turned out to be a serial killer?— but at least she took comfort in the fact that Max had generally kept some healthy skepticism when meeting these guys in the past.

This time, though, she seemed different; more excited about it, for sure. "You know that just because someone's a nerd, that doesn't automatically mean they're a good person, right?" she asked.

Max, as expected, waved off her concern. "I know, I know," she said with a shake of her head before turning on her heel and heading back to her room like she'd forgotten something. "I just want to try something new, you know?" came her voice through the open door. "Can't expect different results if you just keep doing the same thing over and over again."

She had a point, but still. "And that's why you're dressed to the nines? Because you're trying something different?" El asked, making her way from the kitchen to their living room couch and sitting down. She had a ton of reading to do for her Developmental Psychology class.

"No," Max said, finally coming out of her room with her purse in one hand and a jacket hanging off her forearm. "I just figured if this guy's as big of a nerd as his profile on the site makes him sound, then this"— she once again signaled to her outfit— "might actually get him to faint or something. That'd be hilarious."

El had to chuckle. "Which site is this, by the way?" she asked as she picked up her book bag and pulled out a notebook and a pen so she could take notes.

"It's this new site that just opened a couple months ago," Max explained as she shouldered her purse on her way to the door. "Geared specifically toward geeks and nerds and gamers... that kind of folks. It's called [GeekOnFleek.com](http://GeekOnFleek.com)."

El couldn't help but grimace. "That is the *worst* name for a dating site

I have ever heard in my entire life," she commented with a shake of her head. "Are you sure it's legit?" she asked Max, now worried that she might be putting her personal information on some hoax website.

"It's a real company, Officer Hopper. I checked," Max replied in a teasing voice as she leaned her weight against the door handle. "Officer Hopper" was the nickname she used whenever she thought El was being too suspicious— something she repeatedly said she got from her father. "As for the horrible name, well hey, don't knock it till you try it."

"No, thank you," El retorted as she dropped her Dev Psych book on her lap, ready to start reading. No matter how many times Max tried to convince her otherwise, El just wasn't the type to sign up for a dating website. Maybe it really *was* her father's voice in the back of her mind, but she simply wasn't comfortable with the idea of going on a date with someone she'd never even met.

Max groaned, as she usually did whenever she broached this topic and got the same answer from El. "You are never going to find someone if you just sit there and wait for Mr. Right to come in through the door, Jane," she said, using her first name rather than her nickname for emphasis, but to her credit sounding less like a nag and more like a concerned friend. "Sometimes you have to take the initiative, you know? Put yourself out there. Grab the bull by the horns."

El snorted, pointing at her with the capped end of her pen. "Any self-respecting matador out there will tell you that is *terrible* advice," El pointed out smartly, although she was smiling as well. Even if she was never going to follow that particular piece of counsel, she really did appreciate the fact that Max cared.

"Yeah, okay," Max retorted, laughing, before pushing away from the door. "Anyway, I'm out. I should be back before you go to bed, but you never know." She walked out with a wave of her hand.

"Make good choices!" El just barely managed to interject before the door closed between them, and then she was alone. With a resigned sigh, she uncapped her pen, opened her book in the first of the three

chapters her professor had assigned, and started to read.

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It was pouring so hard that Mike could barely see what was right in front of him, so all he could do was follow the bright red blob he knew to be his date's hair as they ran the couple of blocks that separated them from her apartment building. Once they got there, she opened the door and he followed her in— he probably should've asked, but she didn't seem to mind and, honestly, he just wanted to get out of the rain for at least a minute.

"I'm on the second floor," Max said as she started making her way up, and Mike was honestly surprised; given how bored she'd seemed the entire evening, he would've figured she would prefer to say bye right there at the lobby and then never have to see him again. He was enough of a gentleman to walk her to her door if that's what she wanted, though, so when she signaled for him to follow, he did.

She stopped in front of one of four doors to be found on the second-floor landing and turned to him. "This is me," she signaled to the apartment they were standing in front of. "So... this was fun," she said slowly.

The words were so obviously forced, it made Mike's eyebrows lift all the way under his fringe. "Was it, really?" he asked dryly, well aware of the two hours of nervous babbling, awkward laughter and painful silence to which they'd subjected each other.

Max cringed. "No. No, it wasn't," she admitted bluntly, giving up the pretense. "But you seem like a nice guy, so I'm sure you'll find someone eventually," she added, trying to tack on some kind of silver lining there at the end.

"Yeah, thanks," Mike replied in the same dry tone, but really he was more than a little amused at her attempts to spin their current situation into a good thing, because for the most part he felt the same

way about her. It's not that he thought there was anything wrong with her as a person; it was just really obvious from the moment they met that they had no romantic chemistry whatsoever, and pretending they did for the sake of politeness wasn't something he cared to do when he was completely drenched from head to toe and shivering from the cold. "Right, so... bye, then."

He was just about to turn on his heel and go back downstairs when she spoke again. "Hey, do you want to come in? We have freshly baked cookies."

The request was so out of the blue that it stopped him dead in his tracks. "Um, what?" was his immediate reaction, because he honestly had no idea why she would want to extend this failed attempt at a date any longer. Surely she didn't think he was interested in hooking up with her regardless...

His confusion must've shown clearly in his expression, because she rolled her eyes and walked up to him with a huff, pinning him in place with a hand on each shoulder. "That's not a euphemism," she stated unequivocally, looking him straight in the eye. "I'm not going to sleep with you. I just feel bad that I made you run all the way out here in this weather. You can wait out the rain inside."

"Oh," Mike said dumbly, realization finally dawning. "Thanks. That's nice of you."

She patted his shoulders as if saying "Anytime, champ," before turning around and looking for her keys inside her purse. Once she opened the door, Mike saw over her shoulder that it led to a narrow hallway, a decent-sized kitchen to the left and the living room straight ahead.

A brunette he quickly assumed was Max's roommate was sitting on the couch, poring over what looked like a textbook. She looked up from her reading when she heard them come in. "Oh, hey... You didn't tell me you were planning on bringing your date back with you," she said, sounding surprised.

"He's technically not my date anymore," Max replied with a shrug. Mike figured that was probably accurate enough, but at the moment

didn't know if he should be offended or relieved.

The other girl obviously needed more information to understand the situation, though, because she just looked between the two of them with an adorably confused expression on her face. She closed her book, put it down on the coffee table and stood up, and— that's around the time Mike's heart started doing funny skips because *wow*, was she pretty. Beautiful, really, in a completely understated way.

She was around average height and wearing comfortable clothes: a long-sleeved grey sweatshirt and full-length denim overalls that looked a bit big on her, as evidenced by the fact that the fabric at her ankles was rolled up. Mike dimly remembered Will telling him that nobody wore full-length denim overalls anymore except for hipsters, but this girl didn't look like she had one pretentious bone in her body. Perhaps it was because she was also wearing fluffy white socks with— as far as he could tell from that distance— flowers or polka dots printed on them.

Her brown hair fell just past her shoulders in soft ringlets— "princess curls," Holly would call them— and her large, dark eyes framed by long lashes peered at him inquisitively as they moved further into the apartment.

It was when Max spoke again that he realized he was staring like an idiot. "Mike, El, El, Mike," she said, gesturing at each of them in turn. Then she looked between the two of them as if expecting them to react somehow, before adding, "I'm going to go change." Without further ado, she walked off and disappeared behind a door to Mike's left which he guessed was her bedroom.

And so, for the second time that day, he was alone with a girl he'd never even met before, except this time he didn't even get a choice in the matter.

She eyed him warily, as if expecting him to explain his presence in her home, and all he could do was stand there and make a puddle on her floor. "I'm— sorry," he started, unsure of which part of his current dilemma he was apologizing for. "I don't... really know what's happening anymore," he admitted sheepishly.

She must have found his awkwardness funny, though, because she chuckled. "Yeah, Max can have that effect on people," she conceded with a shake of her head as she took a couple of steps closer to him. She smiled warmly at him for a moment longer before speaking again. "Um, would you like to sit down? I'd offer you some dry clothes to change into, but it's just me and Max, so I doubt we have anything that would fit you..."

"Oh, no, don't worry about it," he hurried to assure her, not wanting to be more of a bother than he already was— he'd already made a terrible-enough first impression. "It's okay. I don't want to get your furniture wet or anything..."

"You won't," she, in turn, reassured *him*. "I'll get you some towels—and I think we have an electric heater around here somewhere..." she said, that last part coming out more like she was wondering to herself rather than telling him. "Why don't you give me your jacket? I can hang it up in the bathroom so it will dry out."

"Thank you," he accepted, still feeling a little weird about the whole thing, but taking off his waterlogged jacket and handing it to her regardless. "You don't have to do this," he insisted as she carefully took hold of it.

"It's the least I can do, really," she retorted, waving away his concern. "If you can wait here for a second, I'll go get the towels. Would you like some cookies, by the way?" she offered kindly, once again smiling up at him. "I baked some this afternoon." Somewhere under his utter stupefaction at how pretty her smile was, he was reminded that Max had indeed offered him cookies— she just hadn't mentioned they weren't hers.

As Mike laid some towels down on the recliner so he could sit and plugged in the heater (which warmed his frozen limbs so quickly that he could cry), El handed him a plate with three sugar cookies on it. "So," she started as she walked around the coffee table to get to her previous place on the couch, "not the greatest date ever, then?" She sounded somewhat amused as she sat down.

"That would be an understatement," he replied, unsure if he should be disclosing that so openly to his date's roommate, but he figured



Max would be just as forthright later on anyway. "Not that there's anything wrong with Max, of course," he hastened to add, "I just don't think we... clicked. Honestly, I think I spent most of the time blubbering about *Critical Role* while she played *Temple Run 2* on her phone," he confessed with a shrug.

"I don't know what either of those are," El admitted with some chagrin as she picked up her book and settled it back on her lap, "but, yeah, that doesn't sound like much of a fun evening."

"Could've been worse, I guess," he retorted. Better a boring date than a problematic date, at last. He watched as El opened her book and picked up her highlighter pen, starting to read the page she'd marked. "Friday classes?" he wondered aloud before she could get too into it.

She looked at him again, frowning slightly. "I'm sorry?"

He pointed at the book on her lap. "You're studying. Do you have classes tomorrow? I told Max I have a class in the morning and she looked at me like she'd never heard of such a thing," he explained quickly, so it didn't seem like he was prying.

"Oh." Her eyes widened slightly when she realized what he'd meant. "No, I don't have classes on Fridays," she answered. "I just want to get all my reading done before I go back home for Spring Break," she said, lifting the book up so he could see the cover; it was titled *Developmental Psychology*. Well, no wonder she had a lot of reading to do. "How come you have Friday classes?" she asked him, now curious.

"Engineering major," he replied, figuring that alone said it all. "Fridays are for lab work. I've got three hours of physics lab tomorrow afternoon, on top of Calculus III first thing in the morning," he recounted as he picked up one of the cookies off his plate and bit into it.

She cringed like she felt pained for him, but the gesture then turned into a grin. "That sounds awful," she said, but her tone made it clear that she was teasing.

"It's fun if you like science," he returned with a shrug. He'd always

loved physics lab, personally— it had been his favorite class in high school, apart from A/V club, of course— but it did suck that he couldn't have Fridays off like most of the student population did.

She shook her head as if she couldn't believe anyone would subject themselves to that. He didn't mind; he got that reaction from his family all the time, anyway. "I could never do that," she declared. "I have to take two calculus requirements for my major, and I'm trying to put them off for as long as I can."

Mike couldn't help but chuckle; in his major, calculus was a requirement for most of his junior- and senior-level classes. "Not good at math?" he asked, because in his experience most people who went for humanities or social science majors did so in order to avoid math and science classes.

"No, I was always pretty good at it in high school, actually," she explained, pulling her legs up onto her seat and crossing them Indian style. "But I never really thought of it as fun. And calculus just seems a little... intimidating, I guess."

"Well, if you ever need a tutor, let me know." He leaned back against the backrest of the recliner, now covered with a striped towel, and took another bite of the cookie. It really was quite good; reminded him a bit of the cookies his mother used to bake for Christmas.

It was only a second after the words left his mouth that he realized someone looking in might think that he was flirting. Which he wasn't, not really— not intentionally, at least. It just happened that the conversation between them flowed very easily, for some reason, almost like they'd been friends for a while rather than just having met a few minutes ago. He wasn't sure why that was. Usually he wasn't great at talking to girls, especially not cute ones, but there was something about El that made him feel very comfortable talking to her.

Except now he was afraid she might think he was coming onto her or something. Just the thought that she might think he was being too forward was immediately mortifying, and he was just about to make it clear that he was just trying to be friendly when he saw her lips draw into a shy smile.

Her gaze veered down toward the floor for a moment, almost bashfully, before she looked up at him again. "Well, I guess I know who to call, then," she replied, her fingers playing with one of the pages of her book almost absentmindedly, and it felt like Mike's heart graduated from skips to somersaults.

He wasn't sure how long they sat there smiling at each other— it must've been a few seconds, but it felt like longer— but it was Mike himself who ended up breaking the silence when he cleared his throat, which was suddenly dry. "These are really good, by the way," he said about the cookies, taking the one in his hand back up to his lips for another bite.

It was only when he lowered the crescent-shaped remnant back down onto the plate that he noticed the pattern on the royal icing. "Oh, hey! Are these supposed to look like Eggos?" he asked, finding that an interesting detail.

El's eyes widened, almost like she was pleasantly surprised he had noticed it. "Yes!" she exclaimed with a grin. "It's a, uh... an inside joke, I guess you could call it." At his intrigued expression, she explained further. "Well, see, Eggos are my favorite food," she started. "Once when I was thirteen, we ran out 'cause my dad forgot to buy some when he went to get groceries. So I gathered up as many ingredients as I could find and decided that I would make cookies shaped like Eggos, instead."

One of Mike's eyebrows rose on his forehead. "You couldn't just have made actual waffle batter?" he asked. After all, waffles and cookies were both made with flour and eggs and stuff, right?

"That's exactly what my dad said!" she exclaimed, laughing. "Hence the inside joke, I guess. I really don't know why it didn't just occur to me to do that, we even had a waffle iron and everything." She shook her head as if amused at her thirteen-year-old self. "Anyway, it turned out that my dad really liked the cookies, so now I bake a batch for his birthday every year."

"That's really sweet," he said, her enthusiasm impossible to resist. "You two must be really close."

"Yeah," she replied, her smile turning wistful as she snuck a glance at the kitchen, where the decorative tin holding the rest of the cookies was. "He's basically the only family I have." She looked at him again. "How about you?"

Mike shrugged. "I'm not particularly close to my dad, no. But then again, my family's bigger than yours, so that might be why?" He took another bite of his cookie and made sure to swallow it before speaking this time. "There's my parents, and then two sisters, one older and one younger."

At that revelation, her eyebrows rose, and her smile turned teasing again. "Huh. You know, middle-child syndrome is a real thing," she pointed out, reminding him, in case he forgot, that she was a psychology major.

The response made him laugh. "Yeah... I'm probably textbook," he conceded, which in turn made *her* laugh. Which he, in turn, thought was brilliant.

"I'm sure you're not that bad," she said, shaking her head, before pausing for a second. "You know, I always wanted siblings when I was growing up, but I guess Max is the closest I'm going to get." Her brows drew together then. "Where is she, by the way? It's been a while." She looked around the room, searching.

Mike looked around as well, just now realizing that he'd completely forgotten about the girl who had invited him in in the first place—you know, his *date*. But there was no sign of the redhead; her bedroom door remained closed. "Maybe she fell asleep?" he suggested, really the first reason that came to mind for her choosing to stay locked in her room and leave her roommate, whom he'd just met, to play hostess.

Or maybe she was mad at him for being a terrible date. Who knew.

Whatever the reason was, El put her book down and stood up, making her way to Max's door. Clearly, she intended to check.

She knocked three times on the door. "Max? Are you okay?" she asked, keeping her mouth close to the wood so her voice would carry. "You've been in there for a while. Everything alright?"

As she put her ear against the wood, she heard some clang and clatter coming from inside the room, like Max had tripped on something or was shoving stuff around. Then the tell-tale sound of a hair dryer drowned everything else. "I'm drying my hair!" Max yelled over the noise. "I'll be out in a bit!"

The thought crossed El's mind for a second that the excuse sounded odd, because she hadn't heard the hair dryer at all until she came up to the door, so what had she been doing this entire time? But she figured Max had her reasons, so as long as she was okay... "All right, we'll just be out here."

When she turned back toward the living room, she saw that Mike had also stood up and was looking at her like he wanted to say something. "Is everything okay?" she prompted, gaze sweeping over him as she spoke. His clothes had started to dry up from the heater, as had his hair, which was starting to poof up in the most *adorable* way— not that she was ever going to say that out loud, of course.

He rubbed the palms of his hands against the denim of his jeans as if drying them absentmindedly. "Yeah, um..." He signaled to the window. "It stopped raining," he pointed out. "I should... I should probably go."

"Oh," was the only thing she could think to say, hoping the disappointment wasn't obvious in her expression. She honestly didn't know what was up with her, but she'd almost forgotten Mike wasn't in her apartment because of her; it hadn't occurred to her that he would have to leave at some point. It was a ridiculous thought to have about someone she'd just met 20 minutes ago, but she'd been having fun just talking to him. It was nice. He was nice.

It also didn't hurt that he was *really* cute. In a lanky, geeky sort of way, but she really liked his freckles...

"Right," she added, quickly reminding herself that she shouldn't be thinking that way about her best friend's date. "Um, I'll... I'll go get your jacket, then," she declared, pointing in the general direction of the bathroom.

"Uh, yeah, that— that sounds good," he replied, although it sounded half-hearted to her ears. Maybe he didn't really want to go, either? She told herself she was reaching and forced her feet to take her to the bathroom. If she was going about it slightly slower than she normally would, it wasn't on purpose.

He was standing near the entrance to the kitchen when she came back, having turned off the heater now that he was on his way out. "It's still a little damp," she told him as she handed him the jacket. "It's probably better if you don't put it on straight away, as long as it isn't too cold outside," she suggested helpfully.

"Yeah, thanks," he retorted, giving her a quick but warm smile that made her stomach flutter a bit. "I was going to get an Uber back to campus anyway, so I don't really need to wear this, I guess."

She walked him down the hallway to the door, as she would with any visitors. He didn't step out right away, though; instead, he stood there shuffling his weight from foot to foot for a moment, glancing down at her every couple of seconds. "So, uh, thanks for... all of that," he said, waving his hand in the direction of the living room and the heater and the towels. "It was really nice of you."

"It's no big deal," she insisted, leaning her shoulder against the edge of the open door. As she looked up at him, their eyes met, and for a moment she forgot what she was about to say. Because the hallway was narrow, they were standing closer than they had been since he arrived, and she... really liked it. Him.

"It was nice to meet you, Mike," she said, smiling at him.

"Yeah, it was nice to meet you, too," he replied in kind, his gaze lingering on her for a moment longer. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but what came out of his mouth was "Say bye to Max for me," almost as an afterthought, and finally he turned to leave.

Once again she tried to push down her disappointment as he crossed the doorway, but he'd barely taken one step outside the apartment when he suddenly stopped and spun on his heel so he was looking her way again. "Actually, uh," he started and then paused as if he'd started speaking before he was quite sure what he wanted to say. El just looked at him, a little startled but a lot expectant, waiting to hear whatever he had to tell her.

"It's just—" he tried again, briefly stumbling once more before seeming to finally gather his thoughts. "I hope you don't think this is, like, weird or anything, but, um..." He took a deep breath. "Could I have your phone number?"

El's heart started beating really fast, and she had to bite her lower lip to hold back the bright smile that was threatening to overcome her features. For some reason, it struck her right then how crazy this whole situation was; Max was supposed to be the one worrying about boys, not her. "You literally *just* came back from a date with my best friend," the irony slipped unbidden past her lips, because the whole thing was just funny. Good funny, though.

Mike's hopeful expression quickly fell, though, and El realized that had been the wrong thing to say. "Right. Sorry. I didn't—" he started, looking mortified, and El wanted to tell him he'd misunderstood but she didn't have time, because then he muttered "I'm just gonna go," and turned right back around, making his way right out of the apartment and down the hall toward the stairs.

She only had the length of a heartbeat to feel abashed. Their university was huge, and the Engineering building was on the opposite side of the campus than the Social Sciences building, and she knew if he walked out like this, she might never see him again.

She had to say *something*. Shaking off the weirdness of these circumstances, she remembered what Max had told her earlier that afternoon about putting herself out there. Mike had taken the plunge first; now the ball was in her court. Was she going to let someone who seemed like a great guy just walk away because of a little awkwardness?

*Grab the bull by the horns, Jane*, she told herself. Granted, she still

thought that was a really bad metaphor, but that didn't stop her from poking her head out the door and calling out, "Hey, Mike?"

He stopped in his tracks and turned to look at her, a slight frown marring his brow as if he was confused she was still bothering to talk to him at all. "Uh, yeah?" he asked warily, seeming unsure of her motivation but too polite to just outright ignore her.

Now *she* was the one who had started talking without thinking through what she was going to say. She floundered for a second, but he was waiting for her to speak, so she had to go with the first thing that crossed her mind. Which, oddly, turned out to be "Do you like dinosaurs?"

His frown deepened. "Yes...?" his response came out sounding more like a question than an assertion.

This time she couldn't hold back a smile, because his utterly befuddled expression was just too cute. She leaned against the doorframe as she elaborated on her question. "Well, it's just— *Jurassic World* is playing at the Student Union this weekend," she explained. "I asked Max if she wanted to go, but she has all these *opinions* about the movie," she added with a roll of her eyes. "How it will never live up to the magic of Spielberg, and that she finds it derivative and what not..."

Mike blinked. "It's a sequel," he stated, deadpan.

He took a couple of steps back toward her, though, so El was taking that as a good sign. "I know, right?" she said, laughing. "I love her to bits, but she can be a handful," she added, shaking her head in amusement.

Mike took another step closer— he was only a few feet away now—and smirked, almost reluctantly, it seemed. "Yeah, I can definitely see that," he agreed with a nod, making El wonder if he'd gotten a hint of Max's stubbornness from something that happened on their date. "I didn't peg you as the type to like *Jurassic Park* movies," he added, moving closer.

"No, I'm more of a Chris Pratt fan," she admitted somewhat



sheepishly. She did like the original well enough, but that wasn't really something that would come up in the first 20 minutes of knowing each other, would it? "But since you're into dinosaurs... I thought maybe— maybe you'd like to go with me?" she offered, sure that she was blushing now. "You know... for science," she added with a chuckle.

Now standing only a couple of feet away, he looked down at her for a moment, as if measuring her intent, and El was afraid she'd messed up so badly before that he wasn't interested anymore. But then he smiled. "Well— not much actual science in those movies, but..." He looked down at their feet for a second before nodding. "Yeah. I'd like that," he finally answered.

"Great," she said. "Let's say... Saturday? Outside the Union building at five?" she suggested excitedly. "There's usually a showing at around that time. Or if there's not, we can just go grab something to eat while we wait..." she added shyly.

"Okay," he agreed with a grin. "Cool."

"Cool," she repeated, unable to stop smiling herself. Butterflies were fluttering in her stomach, but then again, that had been her status quo since he had first walked into her apartment that day.

She didn't know how long they stood there just smiling at each other — it was probably longer than it felt to her— but finally it was Mike who ended their moment with a cough. "So... I'll see you Saturday," he said eagerly.

El nodded. "Bye, Mike," she replied. He gave her one last smile as he walked backward a couple of steps, before turning and heading for the stairs again. El leaned her head back against the doorframe and watched him go, pursing her lips to keep herself from giggling.

It was only when his dark hair disappeared from view that El was pulled out of her daydream. "Well, it's a good thing he's not pining over me," came the voice from inside the apartment, making El jump nearly a foot back.

"Jesus," she gasped, taking a hand to her chest as she glared at Max,

who was standing by the entrance to the kitchen, munching on a sugar cookie. "You nearly gave me a heart attack." Shaking her head disgruntledly, El walked fully inside the apartment, closing the front door behind her. "And stop eating the cookies, those are for my dad," she added, walking past her roommate to grab the cookie tin from where it stood on the kitchen counter.

"You didn't seem to have a problem with Mike having some," Max pointed out smartly, taking another bite of her cookie as if raising a challenge.

El rolled her eyes. "Yes, well, he's cuter than you," she retorted, walking out of the kitchen and heading for the couch where she'd left her study materials. She sat down in the same spot she'd previously occupied, carefully propping the cookie tin on the cushion beside her bookbag, and plopped her Dev Psych book right back on her lap again.

Max wasted no time sitting down in front of her— on the coffee table, of course, because it was Max. "Really? You're going to be like that? And to think I just got you a date, too." She shook her head as if disappointed in her. When El didn't respond, she poked her in the knee with the tip of her index finger. "I told you Geek on Fleek would do the trick," she added in a teasing tone.

El let out a snort. "I don't think this," she signaled between her and Max, and then to the door through which Mike had just left, as if connecting the three, "is how dating sites are supposed to work."

"Hey, results are results," Max quipped, pushing herself to her feet. "We'll come back to this conversation after Saturday," she declared, starting to walk around the table and toward her room. "I'm gonna go watch some Netflix. Don't study too hard!"

With those parting words, her friend disappeared into her room again — this time, thankfully, no hair dryers were involved— and El chuckled to herself. Opening her book at the page where she'd left off before, she mused to herself that now she had even more incentive to get her reading done quickly.

After all, she had somewhere to be on Saturday.

## Notes for the Chapter:

No, but seriously, why isn't there a major dating website dedicated to nerds/geeks/fandom people yet? It seems like such a genius idea that if I were at all competent with business and/or tech, I'd totally make one myself. If anyone ever does create one, though, and wants to use the *best website name ever* (shush, El), I am always available for royalty negotiations. ;)

(And yes, I *did* patch together [a logo for the site](#), because I am just *that* big of a dork)

There are so many oblique and/or character-flipped references to the show in this one, I couldn't possibly list them all. I do hope you caught them, though! As it stands, the "Make good choices!" quote I got from the movie *Pitch Perfect*. *Critical Role* is a *Dungeons & Dragons* web series on Geek & Sundry; I know nothing about it, but all the D&D players in my Twitter timeline seem to really love it, so I figured it's something Mike and the boys would be into. *Temple Run 2* is a mobile phone game by Imangi Studios which I also know nothing about other than the name sounded cool (I am the worst geek ever, I know).

*Jurassic World* is a 2015 movie in the *Jurassic Park* franchise starring Chris Pratt, and of course our future overlords at Netflix need no introduction. Mike's Friday schedule was exactly my own during my sophomore year of undergrad, so shoutout to all my fellow Engineering majors out there who know the pain of Friday classes (and any other majors who had to suffer through them, too).

When the concept for this story came to me, I intended for it to stand as a one-shot. I do have some ideas as to where things could go from here, though,

so I *miiiiight* be open to some convincing if you guys want to see one or two more chapters to this. *BUT!* You folks have to review/comment and let me know if you'd like that, otherwise I'll just leave it as-is.

Comments and kudos and views have been dwindling lately, and while I'm not hung up on the numbers (I love and appreciate every single review/comment/kudo/view I get, you guys are seriously the best), it does make me sad that the hiatus is getting the better of the fandom. And fandom sadness is not conducive to me wanting to write more, so y'all gotta show me some excitement here if you really want me to do this. Also feel free to drop me a line via Tumblr [@girls-are-weird](#) or Twitter [@girls\\_are\\_weird](#). That helps, too.

## 2. Not a Fluke

### Notes for the Chapter:

This is a modern-day AU, and thus completely unrelated to any of my previous stories in the [Quiet Moments](#) series. Just wanted to make sure that's clear so there's no confusion. Also, El's powers, as well as any Upside Down elements, do not exist in this story.

As she waited outside the Student Union building on campus, El checked the time on her phone, then chided herself for doing so. There were still a few more minutes left to go until five o'clock, and she shouldn't be acting like there weren't.

Mike wasn't late, she'd just arrived early. And even if he *did* arrive a little late, it wasn't the end of the world; the movie didn't start for a while, so there was no rush. She didn't mind if he wasn't there at *exactly* five; he probably had a good reason. Maybe something came up on the way. Sometimes trains were late. Did he even have to take the train to get there? Was he close to campus? It struck her just then that he'd been to her apartment, but she didn't even know which part of the city he lived in.

Okay, she had to stop obsessing about this. It wasn't about Mike or the time. She was just nervous. And excited, too. Mostly excited, but she was nervous as well. She didn't go on dates often for many reasons, but she was really looking forward to this one. She wanted to see if the way she felt just talking with Mike a couple of days ago was a one-time fluke, or if that chemistry was something that could grow into something deeper. She liked that feeling, so she hoped it was the latter.

She took a deep breath as she looked out at the people walking by. She had hoped the campus would be a little emptier than usual given that it was the first Saturday of Spring Break, but it seemed many other students thought as she and Max had, waiting until Sunday to get out of the city.

At least Mike had stayed in town this weekend, too. She smiled to herself, hoping that her eyes would catch his dark hair as he approached. He was tall, so it probably wouldn't be hard to pick him out in a crowd.

She was looking to her right when a pained exclamation to her left snapped her out of her thoughts. "Son of a bitch!" she heard, turning straight away to see two guys who looked around her age standing nearby. One of them, curly-haired and wearing a red, white, and blue mesh cap, was bent forward, examining his left foot like it hurt and glaring at the ground beneath it.

The other man, taller and broad-shouldered, was looking at him with thinly-disguised exasperation. "Seriously, Dustin?" he muttered, shaking his head as if in disbelief. The curly-haired guy didn't pay him any attention, focused as he was on his foot.

"Are you okay?" El asked, approaching them carefully. They were close enough that she only needed to take a couple of steps to stand beside them.

The taller one looked down at her and sighed. "He's fine, he just somehow managed to trip on nothing but air."

"I'm telling you, the *floor* is *uneven* right here, Lucas—" the curly-haired guy protested immediately, but he straightened up and put his full weight on both feet, so El assumed his left ankle didn't really hurt all that much after all. "Anyway, yeah, I'm okay. Thanks," he said, giving her a grateful smile. His gaze then turned inquisitive. "Are you El?"

El blinked, not expecting that question. "Yes," she confirmed with a curious frown. "How do you—"

Before she could finish the question, the curly-haired guy turned to his friend and playfully pushed his shoulder. "Look at that! She's actually real," he said with an amused grin, which caused his friend to roll his eyes.

"Dude, *shut up*," the taller one hissed through clenched teeth, but of course El could hear it without a problem. Regardless, he turned back to look at her. "Don't mind him. I'm Lucas, and this is Dustin." He signaled to his friend as he spoke, and his friend in turn smiled at her again. "We're roommates of Mike's," Lucas added.

"Oh," she said as it dawned on her that they were probably here *on behalf* of Mike. "Is everything okay? Is Mike all right?" she asked, now concerned. She'd been worried before that he might be late, but it had never really occurred to her that he wouldn't come at all. The thought hadn't even crossed her mind.

"Oh yeah, he's fine," the curly-haired guy— Dustin— was quick to reassure her. "But Will, our other roommate, isn't doing so hot right now," he added with something of a grimace. "He had a bit of a bicycle accident a little while ago. Mike went with him to the hospital."

"Oh no!" El exclaimed, relieved that Mike was all right, but now worried that his friend might be in danger. That would suck. "Is he going to be okay?"

"Yeah, no worries. They think he might've broken his leg, but he should be fine otherwise," Dustin assured her. "Since we were nearby anyway, Mike asked us to stop by and let you know that he won't be able to make it to your date."

"I understand," El said with a nod. It made perfect sense that Mike had to be there for his friend— she'd do the same for Max in a heartbeat.

"But," Dustin intervened once more before the disappointment could fully creep up on her, "if you give us your phone number, we'll pass it on to Mike so he can call you and maybe reschedule?" he offered sincerely, and his smile was contagious because El felt the corners of her mouth start crinkling up.

"That would be great, thank you," she responded, grateful that he'd brought it up. It had completely slipped her mind that she didn't even have Mike's phone number to begin with, and she never did give him

hers on Thursday. If Dustin hadn't mentioned it, she might've gone home without any way to contact Mike ever again. That would've been terrible. "Do you have a piece of paper, maybe...?"

"Ah, actually, I think— gimme a sec—" Dustin's hands dove into the front pocket of his Carnegie Museum of Natural History hoodie and after a second of searching he pulled out the first thing he could find, which turned out to be a 3 Musketeers bar. "Oops," he muttered. "Can you hold this for a minute, please—" He handed the chocolate bar to Lucas almost absentmindedly before diving into his pocket again.

Under Lucas and El's dumbfounded looks, Dustin continued pulling stuff out of his hoodie's pocket in such volume that El wondered internally if it might be bigger on the inside, like Mary Poppins' bag.

A silver figurine, or more like a game piece, of a snake-like creature with two heads. A worn paperback edition of a book with a bearded old man on the cover. Three little packets of salt, the kind you'd find at a table in a restaurant. A little plush toy in the shape of a mouse that looked like it was made for cats to play with. A set of keys on a Millennium Falcon keychain.

Until, finally, he pulled out a small pad of post-it notes and a retractable pen, which he clicked into its usable position as he handed both to her. "Here," he said before he turned to Lucas, who was glaring at him as he held up his pile of random knickknacks, to grab his stuff back. "Thank you very much," he said, stretching out the first syllable in a whimsical way.

"I don't even know why I'm friends with you," Lucas muttered as El wrote her number down on the topmost post-it note. He relaxed once he was no longer bogged down by Dustin's things, though. "Is that it?" he asked her as she clicked the pen closed, and she nodded her head, handing both paper and pen back to Lucas because Dustin was too busy rearranging everything back into his pocket.

"Right," Dustin said once he was done (the salt packets went in last because they occupied less space). He gave El another warm smile and added, "So. We have to head to the hospital now, but—"



"Oh, come on now," Lucas interrupted suddenly in a harsh tone, snapping El's attention away from whatever it was Dustin had been about to say. "You know, if you don't want to go out with Mike, all you had to do was say that. You don't need to give him a fake number."

"Lucas, don't be a jerk..." Dustin warned in a careful but practiced tone, like warning his friend not to be mean was something he did on a regular basis.

She was caught off-guard by Lucas's accusation. "I'm... sorry...?" she asked, confused as to why he would get that impression. Of course she wanted to go on a date with Mike; that's why she was at the Union. Lucas knew that. *They'd* approached *her*. "Why would you think that? That's my real number."

"Seriously? You think I'm buying that?" Lucas scoffed, lifting up the pad of post-it notes so that both she and Dustin could see the number scribbled on it. "These are the first seven digits of the gas constant."

Dustin grabbed the pad of post-its from Lucas's hand and his lips drew into the brightest grin he'd given her so far. "Hey! The area code is the ideal gas volume, too. That is just *mental*!" It was hard for El to follow, but thankfully, he seemed more amused than offended, unlike Lucas.

She felt herself flinch under Lucas's glare. "Guys, I have no idea what you're talking about," she hurried to explain. Sure, she had faint memories of studying ideal gases at high school level, but remembering the actual numbers was a task beyond her expertise. "I swear, that's my real phone number. You can call it right now and check, if you don't believe me."

"That's not necessary," Dustin intervened before Lucas could respond. "We believe you. Lucas is just being a shithead."

Lucas glared at him again. "Oh, *I'm* being a shithead?" he threw back, indignant. "You thought Mike had made her up!"

"Well, what was I supposed to think?" Dustin retorted, a little

defensive. "He comes in and tells us his date was a disaster, but then he met his date's roommate and she was really pretty and smart and they totally hit it off?" He shook his head. "You gotta admit that's a *little* bit unrealistic."

Their bickering went on for a minute longer, but El wasn't really paying attention. Her mind was focusing on a smaller detail Dustin had just let slip. "Mike said I was pretty?" she asked, unable to hold back a giddy smile.

The twosome turned toward her again. "Uh, yeah, he's pretty much been talking about you nonstop for the last two days," Lucas said. "It's *really* annoying, actually," he added, except he didn't sound like he was all that annoyed— not anymore, at least.

"It's really funny," Dustin added, chuckling throughout the sentence. "He's completely besotted."

El was sure she was blushing, and the smile on her face felt like it wouldn't go away in days. Lucas was staring at her, too, which made her feel a bit self-conscious given that he'd already accused her of lying, but even that couldn't tamp down the bubbly feeling in her chest.

Lucas must've noticed, because he sighed. "Look, maybe I shouldn't have jumped on you like that. It was a weird coincidence, I guess, but you just seem like you're way out of his league, and I don't want him to get hurt," he admitted begrudgingly.

El frowned, again feeling defensive— but not just for herself, this time; also for Mike. "That's an awful thing to say about your friend. And you don't even know me, anyway," she retorted, instinctively crossing her arms as she glared, like she did whenever she caught her dad sneaking out of the house to smoke. "I'm not out of his league. There's no game here. I actually really like him."

"Yes, girl!" Dustin said with that bright, toothy grin of his, extending the first word for emphasis. "I like you. Anyone who can put Lucas in his place when he's being an ass will fit right in with us," he declared, putting up a hand for her to high-five.

Before she could do so, however, Lucas rolled his eyes and shoved Dustin playfully. "Shut up," he muttered, but when he turned to El, it was obvious he was holding back laughter. "Okay, you're right. I'm sorry," he conceded with a nod of his head, pointedly ignoring Dustin's theatrical gasp at his apology. "You seem like a cool girl. We'll give Mike your weird-ass phone number."

"Thank you," she replied, dropping her sharp stare to give him a satisfied nod.

"Just don't freak out if he calls you like two seconds after we hand this over to him," Dustin added, waving the little pad of post-its in front of him.

El smiled. She knew he was hinting that seeming overeager was a bad thing when it came to dating— she'd heard Max complaining about it often, when one of her dating-site guys kept haranguing her about a second date she didn't want— but that was a dating convention she had never quite understood. In her opinion, Mike wanting to talk to her was hardly a terrible thing. She liked talking to him. The timing of it didn't really matter. "I don't mind," she let Dustin know, the smile making its way back. "I hope he does."

Dustin's eyebrows lifted so high on his forehead that they disappeared under the corkscrew curls of his fringe. "Wow," he interjected, like he couldn't believe those words could come out of a girl's mouth. "Okay, where are you from, and by any chance do you happen to have a sister—"

"Idiot," Lucas once again muttered under his breath as El laughed. She liked Dustin; he seemed like someone she'd love to be friends with. Lucas she still wasn't sure of, but now that he had backed off, she was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. He was friends with Mike and Dustin, after all, and they were nice, so surely he couldn't be too bad. "We have to get going," he reminded his curly-haired roommate.

Dustin nodded. "Yeah, we need to get to the hospital before it gets too dark." He turned to El and pointed at her with finger guns. "Hey,

it was nice to meet you! I hope things work out between you and Mike."

"It was nice to meet you, too," she responded in kind, giving him a sincere smile. "I hope your friend is okay." Lucas looked for a moment like he wanted to say something, too, but after shifting awkwardly for a second, he just nodded his head as a farewell. She returned the gesture.

The two of them started making their way down the sidewalk and as they disappeared from sight, El sighed. She could still make it to the movie, but she didn't really want to go by herself. And much like Mike's two roommates, she didn't really want to be walking around town on her own after dark, so she decided to head back home, instead. Maybe she could watch *Jurassic World* with Mike some other day.

She took the train back to her apartment, unable to help feeling a little crestfallen; she'd really been looking forward to this date. There was something about him that was just so open, so welcoming, that she wanted to get to know more about him. Everything about him.

Even in his absence she'd learned something important about him: he was there for his friends when they needed him, no matter what else was going on in his life, and they cared about him just as strongly in return. She liked that. It only made him an even better person in her eyes than she already thought he was.

It only made her want to know more about who he was. What made him tick. She was curious by nature— and she was often curious about *people*, which was one of the reasons why she'd chosen psychology as her major— but Mike had managed to capture that curiosity over the course of a single conversation. That was rare.

She walked up the steps of her apartment building and pulled out the keys to her front door, and as she walked into the apartment and took off her shoes, it was hard not to feel like this was a huge missed opportunity.

She had only been home for about five minutes when she got a call.

Since she was supposed to be on a date, Max had gone out with a couple of her classmates, so El had the apartment to herself until her roommate came back later in the evening, and she didn't have to run back to her room for privacy when she picked up her phone. The call was coming from an unknown number— it could only be one person, really— and El felt that giddy feeling from earlier come back in full force as she let herself drop on the couch and put the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Hi. El?" It was indeed Mike's voice on the other end of the line, and immediately she couldn't help but smile. "It's Mike. Mike Wheeler. Although, uh, I guess I never actually told you my last name, so it's not like it matters..." he finished in a quiet mumble.

El laughed. "I know who you are, Mike," she assured him, already charmed all over again.

"Right," he replied with what sounded like a nervous chuckle, and El could just imagine him shaking his head wherever he was. "Um, I just wanted to say I'm really sorry I couldn't make it today," he launched straight to the point of his call. "One of my roommates had an accident and I had to get him to the hospital—"

"I know, Dustin and Lucas told me," El confirmed. She wondered if he was calling her from the hospital, or if they'd gone home already. "Is your friend going to be all right? I hope it's nothing bad..."

"Ah, no, he's going to be fine," he let her know. "He'll have to get around on crutches for a few weeks, but he should heal just fine." He laughed lightly. "It was going to happen eventually, anyway. We keep telling him not to take that shortcut through the park because it gets muddy when it rains, but apparently there are a bunch of guys who play soccer there every Saturday and Will can't resist the view," he finished, a fondness for his friend coloring his tone.

"Me and my obsession with Chris Pratt understand that feeling very well," she replied, also chuckling. "Are you still at the hospital? It's

late," she asked him. It was an entirely familiar line of thought to her; while growing up, it happened often that her dad had to work late and had to leave her home alone. It had bothered her initially, but she had grown to understand that his work was important, even though she never stopped worrying.

It was different with Mike because they barely knew each other, but the concern poured out of her mouth almost unbidden nonetheless. Thankfully, he didn't seem to think it was weird. "Yeah, but Lucas and Dustin are with Will now so I snuck out for a bit so I could call you," he responded easily.

He paused for a second and she heard a shuffle, like he'd been walking before but had stopped now. "By the way, please ignore any ridiculousness Dustin and Lucas might've brought up when they talked to you," he added hurriedly. "They mean well, but we've known each other for so long that sometimes they forget other people don't get their teasing..."

She couldn't help a giggle— he sounded so worried his friends might've said or done something embarrassing. "No, it's okay," she was quick to put his worries to rest. "I liked them. Dustin is really funny, and Lucas... well, you've had to deal with Max already, so I think we're even."

Mike wasn't buying it. "He gave you a hard time, didn't he?" He groaned. "Ugh, I'm going to kill him..."

"Don't, it's okay," she reiterated, wanting to make sure she didn't create any issues between him and his friend. She felt like she and Lucas had already come to a truce, anyway. "Really, I think it's sweet that they care about you so much. They're good friends."

"I guess," Mike muttered with such reluctance that it made El laugh again; she could just picture him rolling his eyes on the other side of the line. "I just—" There was another pause, and more shuffling sounds— was he pacing, maybe?— before he spoke again. "It really sucks that this happened, though. I was, um... I was really looking forward to seeing you again," he admitted, a little bashfully.

She leaned back against the armrest of the couch, doing her best to ignore the swooping sensation in her stomach as she heard him say that. "Me too," she replied in a soft tone, wishing they were talking face to face instead of through the phone.

"Cool," he intoned, almost in a relieved sigh. "So, I was thinking maybe we could do something together, erm, some other time, then," he suggested, hopeful. "We can catch the movie on streaming, if you still want to see it. Or we could do something else, too, if you prefer," he added quickly, as if the thought had just occurred to him. "There's always something to do in the city. I could ask around."

"I'd like that," El responded sincerely. She rearranged a sofa pillow under her back, as her position wasn't as comfortable as she had originally thought it would be. "But it would have to wait a while," she clarified. "I'm going home tomorrow, and I won't be back in town until right before classes start back up again."

"Yeah," he said, taking in this information. "Yes, that makes sense, of course. I was actually going to stay here during break— pick up a few extra shifts at work, maybe— but now that Will broke his leg, he's going to need help getting around back home, so I think I'm going back with the guys anyway."

She smiled, wondering if he realized the little details he sometimes let slip, which gave her some slight insight into his life. He probably didn't, but she was the daughter of a cop and she'd just grown up paying attention to those sorts of things. "You and your roommates are all from the same town?" she asked, curious.

"Ah, yes," he replied, sounding like he did, indeed, only just realize he'd let that slip. "We've all been friends since grade school, so we all grew up together, know each other's families very well and stuff," he explained. "They were all going back for the break from the get-go, but I don't know... I don't much feel like going back home just for one week," he added, sounding resigned. "I guess now I have to."

"Don't want to deal with your family?" she asked, genuinely interested. El adored her dad and worried about him all the time, so every chance she got to go back home and spend time with him, she

would take. It was a little unfathomable to her that other people might want to stay away from their families, but of course she understood that sometimes people's relationships with their parents and siblings weren't ideal. Maybe not terrible, but not perfect, either. Just because she lucked out with her dad didn't mean that everybody else did. Max, for example, had a lot of problems with her own family, and El always tried to be there for her and make her feel better when it all got to her.

"Maybe a little," he admitted, somewhat reluctantly. "Middle child issues and all of that, right?" he added. El giggled, wondering if that meant they had an inside joke of their own now. "In all seriousness, though, my family's not that bad. I'm only dreading it because my older sister isn't going to be there— she's already finished college and is living in New York, so she doesn't get a break. It just kind of sucks that I won't have her there as a buffer, I guess," he concluded, sounding a little more like he was talking to himself than to her.

"But, really," he continued, "it's more that I know I'll be bored out of my mind. My hometown is really small and everybody knows everything about everyone. And sure, the guys will be there so we'll hang out like we do here, but there's nothing to do in that town that we haven't already done a billion times while growing up."

"I know the feeling," El retorted, remembering the lonelier parts of her childhood in the outskirts of her own little suburb, except she never had friends or siblings like Mike's to make it more bearable. Just her and her dad against the world.

"Yeah?" he said, almost like he was surprised she could relate. "Well..." He paused again. "Actually... I was thinking maybe I could..." He cleared his throat. "Would it be okay if I called you? During the week, I mean. Just to chat."

El chuckled. "I thought people didn't talk on the phone anymore. It's all texting these days," she teased him.

"True, but sometimes old school is better," he retorted in a similar tone. She bit back a grin. "Besides, talking is more... involved, I think. Maybe it could help make the time pass faster. God knows I'll need



*something* fun to look forward to while I'm at home."

"Quite the hipster, Mr. Wheeler," she returned, and for some reason he seemed to find that really funny. His laughter made her heart skip a beat. "I'd like that," she went back to his earlier question once his mirth started to die down. "I'd like it if you called me. I like hearing your voice."

That last part made it past her lips without her meaning to say it, and as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she felt cheeks flush. "Oh my God, I can't believe I just said that," she said, covering her face with one in mortification, even though he couldn't see her.

He laughed. "No, it's okay, I... I feel the same way. Obviously. Otherwise I wouldn't have asked," he assured her, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "I'm... really glad it's not just me," he added softly.

"It's not just you," she confirmed, sitting up and wrapping an arm around her knees with a sigh. She almost wished she didn't have to go back home for the week; she wanted to see him sooner than that.

"Awesome," he said, sounding happy about that. "So, um, I gotta get back to Will and the others," he let her know. "I'll... I'll talk to you later, then?"

"Yeah," she replied, basking in the effervescent feeling inside her. Even if they hadn't been able to go on their movie date, she was pretty sure now that this connection between them wasn't a fluke. At least, she really hoped it wasn't. "Bye, Mike."

"Bye, El," he returned, and then there was a pause on the other end of the line, like he wasn't quite sure whether he should hang up or not. Eventually, though, he did end the call, and El pulled the phone away from her ear with a giggle. She grabbed the nearest couch pillow and hugged it to her chest.

That's how Max found her when she got back from her outing some ten minutes later, but this time El didn't even mind the teasing because she was in such high spirits. She couldn't wait until she got a

chance to talk to Mike again.

### Notes for the Chapter:

This one turned out longer than I expected it to, so rejoice: you get at least one more chapter! Just don't expect much in the way of plot— we all know this entire enterprise is just an excuse for me to write cutesy Mike/El scenes because I can. LOL. xD

Once again, there are so many references to the show here that I can't possibly list them all (the contents of Dustin's pocket, for one, were fun to write), but apart from that: The Carnegie Museum of Natural History is a real museum in Pittsburgh. Mary Poppins is the main character in a series of children's books by P.L. Travers, as well as a 1964 Disney movie featuring Julie Andrews as the title character. The gas constant ( $R$ ) is  $8.314460 \text{ J/K}\cdot\text{mol}$ , while the ideal gas volume at standard temperature and pressure (STP) is  $22.4 \text{ L}$ ; 224 also happens to be the phone area code for several northern suburbs of Chicago.

PS: Last week's episode of [my vlog](#) was about [the latest tidbits we've learned about \*Stranger Things\* season 3](#), so maybe check it out if you'd like? I don't know?

### 3. Serendipity

#### Notes for the Chapter:

This is a modern-day AU, and thus completely unrelated to any of my previous stories in the [Quiet Moments](#) series. Just wanted to make sure that's clear so there's no confusion. Also, El's powers, as well as any Upside Down elements, do not exist in this story.

Max's entire family still lived in California, so she rarely visited them because 1) plane tickets were freaking expensive (in the case of her father's side), and 2) she just didn't really want to deal with them (in the case of her mother's side).

She was especially not willing to justify such an expense for the shorter breaks, so whenever they got just one or two weeks off from school, as in the case of their Spring Break, Max would instead spend the break with El, who had grown up in a suburb of Chicago, some forty minutes away from their school. Because her hometown was so close, she went back often to visit her father, and Max came along whenever her schoolwork allowed it.

El, for her part, was only too happy to have her best friend join her on her visits back home. She'd never had any close friends while growing up, but she had quickly bonded with Max upon their first few weeks of sharing an apartment. As far as El was concerned, Max was like a sister to her, so it made total sense for her to be there while she visited her actual family.

It also didn't hurt that El's dad had grown to love the fiery redhead almost like a surrogate daughter. They shared a similar sense of humor and a slightly cynical view of the world that other people, El included, sometimes couldn't understand. El liked to joke that he would adopt Max if he could, even though he always rolled his eyes at that. But it was fair to say that the two of them got along swimmingly, and El was genuinely glad they did... except when they ganged up on her, that is.

"So," Hopper started as he twisted a few strands of his (microwavable) pasta around his fork. It was Wednesday, so he had work, and Max and El had gone to the mall earlier so neither of them felt like cooking once they got back home. They'd all decided to just fall back on one of their old staples. "Who's this *boy* you've been talking to every night, then?" he asked, emphasizing the word *boy* as if it held some ulterior significance.

El sighed. Max had mostly given up on the teasing after switching Mike's ringtone on El's phone to "Mickey" by Toni Basil a couple days ago (it always made her snigger, but the joke's on her because El actually quite liked that song). El thought that meant her Spring Break would be mostly free of questions about Mike, but really she should've known her dad would bring it up if Max didn't. She *had* been talking to Mike on the phone every day, sometimes for hours. It's not like it was some sort of secret. But, still, it was a weird thing to be talking about with her father when she'd only known Mike for less than a week.

She was about to tell him it wasn't a big deal when Max spoke up. "His name is Mike," she said, answering Hopper's question for her while pushing one of her meatballs around on her plate.

"*Max*," El hissed at her friend, sending her an exasperated look.

"Mike, huh?" Hopper mumbled, like the name alone could tell him something about the person. "And how long have you and this Mike been dating?" he inquired further, trying too hard to sound casual, before he took his forkful of pasta up to his mouth.

"They're not actually dating," Max intervened again before El had a chance to put together a reply, her words punctuated by a *clang* as she finally speared her meatball, fork scraping against the bottom of her plate in the process.

"*Max!*" El hissed at her blabbermouth of a best friend again, this time with an outright glare. Feeling her father's curious gaze on her, she turned to him with a sigh. "Technically, we haven't gone on a date yet," she explained carefully, trying not to say too much. She didn't

want to jinx it. "It's... complicated."

Her dad's brows lifted up high on his forehead. "I may be an old man," he started, somewhat warily, "but even I know enough about Facebook to know that 'it's complicated' is code for 'hooking up randomly.'"

Max burst out in laughter so sudden she almost choked on her meatball, just as El gaped at her dad with wide eyes, cheeks immediately flushing. "Excuse me," she objected in an indignant tone, "but there is only *one* person in this family who is prone to 'hooking up randomly,' and it is *definitely* not me."

Her father at least had the decency to look chagrined, if not repentant. "Touché," he conceded, which El then scoffed at. Who was the grown-up here, again? "But still, you're my little girl," Hopper added. "I think I have a right to try and figure out this guy's intentions towards you..."

"I'm pretty sure I can gauge his intentions on my own, thank you very much," El retorted, still embarrassed just *thinking* of her father and 'hooking up' in the same sentence, plus him poking his nose into her relationship (or non-relationship, as it stood) with a guy she really likes. "Besides, 'intentions'? What is this, the eighties?"

"More like the eighteen hundreds," Max chortled into her spaghetti. With a smirk, she started speaking in an *awful* Cockney accent. "Worry not, Master Hopper," she said, pointing at El's dad with the end of her fork. "The new beau is, as we young'uns like to call it, a massive nerd. You may rest assured that your daughter's virtue will remain intact for the foreseeable future."

Hopper barked out a laugh. "That is the most *terrible* British accent I have ever heard," he commented, shaking his head at Max in an affectionate manner.

Max shrugged. "Hey, I'm in Women's Studies, not Theater," she threw back, sweeping up the last bit of her pasta onto her fork.

El rolled her eyes, taking this tangent as an opportunity to steer the

conversation away from her love life. "Speaking of— hey, Dad, did Max ever mention her new policy of only dating nerds?" she asked hoping she could trick him into switching from embarrassing his daughter to embarrassing his surrogate daughter instead.

However, no such luck. "Huh, that's interesting," he said, giving Max the same amused look with the lifted eyebrows for about half a second, before turning to El again. "So maybe if your boyfriend's as big of a nerd as it sounds like he is, you could introduce Max to some of his friends or something."

"Urgh," El groaned, covering her face with her hand as Max laughed. "You two are the *worst*. I don't know why I ever thought it was a good idea to let you be in the same room at the same time."

"How did you even meet this guy, anyway?" Hopper asked, going back to his dinner now that he'd embarrassed his daughter enough.

Once again it was Max who answered the question. "They met after he came back from a date with me," she responded succinctly as she lifted the last forkful of her meal to her mouth.

"*Stop that!*" El whined, shoving her friend to the side as Max's shoulders shook with laughter again.

Her dad, however, was just looking between the two of them with a baffled expression, food still hanging off his fork, almost like Max had spoken in a different language and he was having trouble parsing the meaning of her words. "Okay, you know what? I take it back," he eventually said, likely deciding it wasn't worth the effort. "I really am too old for this shit."

It was El's turn to shake her head affectionately at her old man. Sure, he liked to tease her relentlessly whenever he got a chance, and when he and Max got going it was like they amplified each other's evilness, but she would rather have that than not. She loved them both so much.

She was about to give as good as she got, though— something about senior citizens and modern technology, since he gave her the opening

— but just as she opened her mouth to speak, a tinny-sounding peppy chorus made its way to their ears: *Oh, Mickey, you're so fine. You're so fine, you blow my mind...* Max and Hopper turned to her in unison, and all El could do was close her mouth with an audible clang, biting her lower lip.

The amusement in their expressions was legendary as they stared, like they were waiting for El to say something. El was just trying really hard to pretend that her phone wasn't ringing, never mind that she was blushing all the way up to her ears. Really, could this night get any more embarrassing?

Finally, her dad decided to put her out of her misery. "Oh, just go," he said, waving his hand in the direction of the living room, where the sound was coming from. "You know you want to," he added, rolling his eyes in fond resignation.

"Thank you!" she squealed, not wasting one second before she bolted out of her chair and toward the place where she'd left her phone earlier. She heard the two of them laughing again as she hurriedly grabbed her phone from the couch and ran to her room, but once she closed the door behind her, she was no longer thinking of Hopper, Max, or their teasing.

She sat down on her bed and put the phone to her ear. "Hi, Mike," she said breathlessly as the call came through. The squirm of embarrassment she'd felt in her tummy with her dad and Max just a minute earlier suddenly became butterflies.

"Hey, El," he returned warmly, as he always did. Every time he greeted her, she swore she could feel his smile through the phone. She loved that she knew his voice well enough to be able to tell. "Sorry I'm calling so early, the guys and I are catching a 9 pm screening at the movie theater— there's some comedy Lucas can't wait to see— but I still wanted to talk to you, at least for a bit." He cleared his throat. "I didn't catch you halfway through dinner, did I? If I did—"

"No! Don't worry, you didn't," she hurried to let him know. And it was *technically* true; she'd been (mostly) done with her food when he

called.

"Good," he replied, sounding relieved. There was a metallic squeak on the other side of the line, sort of like the sound the legs of a chair would make when scraping against the floor. "So, how was your day?" he finally asked.

"Apart from learning that my dad is evil and that Max is a worse influence on him than she is on me?" she asked with a snort, her legs dangling back and forth as they hung over the side of her bed. "Just your average Wednesday, I guess."

Mike laughed at her sarcastic tone. "At least you don't have to drive him all over town like I do my little sister." He snorted. "I swear, she's a mini-dictator and she's not even twelve yet."

"That must be terrible," El cooed, then undercut her own teasing by laughing at the end of the sentence. "At least you get to drive places. I'm stuck taking the bus." She let herself fall back so she was lying down on the bed. "Although Max and I did go to the mall today, so that was something. I bought some books I hadn't been able to find in the city."

"Really?" He sounded surprised. "Huh. It's usually the other way around for me," he admitted. "So what are they about?"

"The books?" she asked, absentmindedly playing with a lock of her hair. "Well, I got a couple for extra research for my Psych classes, but I also got the latest by Steena Holmes, which makes me happy. I had almost given up and bought it online."

"That name sounds familiar," he mused out loud, like he was trying to figure out where he'd heard it from.

"You've read her stuff?" El asked eagerly.

"No, I don't think so," he concluded, though he didn't sound completely sure. "I think my sister Nancy might have, though," he posited. From what little El had learned about his older sister through their phone conversations, it sounded like something she would like.



"Is it like for girls?"

El groaned. "It's a *mystery* featuring a female lead," she corrected him, shaking her head at how many times she had heard the broader genre being called "chick lit." It was very reductive. "Also, never say that around Max, or I won't be held responsible for what she does to you."

He chuckled. "Noted." There was more squeaking on his end of the line, a bit less loud this time, and El wondered if he was just adjusting his position in whatever chair he was sitting on. "I don't read much mystery, though— not unless it's part of a sci-fi or fantasy plot, at least," he informed her. "That's kind of what I stick to these days. Or comic books."

"What kind of sci-fi/fantasy books?" she asked, genuinely interested. Little details like which books they liked could say a lot about a person.

He didn't answer for a few seconds, and for a moment she worried she'd said something wrong. But then he spoke again. "You really want to know?" he asked, sounding doubtful for some reason. "It doesn't sound like the kind of thing you'd like."

"Why not? I'll read just about anything," she assured him. "I love reading. I'll take any recommendations you can give me." And that was true. She enjoyed reading because it was so easy to lose herself in the lives of the characters and the world they lived in. Or, more accurately, she liked to find herself in them.

But she also enjoyed it because it was something of a personal triumph for her. She hadn't been good at reading while growing up, and it took her a lot of effort to get to the level required of her age group in reading speed and comprehension. Once she finally got the hang of it during her teenage years, she made a promise to herself that she would never let herself fall behind again, and that led her to become a voracious reader.

"O-ho, man. Don't encourage me," Mike replied in an amused tone. "I could give you a whole list."

"Actually, I'd really like that," she insisted. "As long as you think they're good..." She was always on the hunt for good books to read, but she hadn't often shopped in the science fiction or fantasy sections of bookstores, or libraries as it may be. Not because she had anything against those two genres, but mainly because it seemed like such a daunting enterprise. There were so many books, and they all seemed connected; she didn't know where to start. Getting book recs from someone who knew the genres well sounded like a good idea.

Once again he was silent for a moment, but then she heard him take a deep breath, as if readying himself to start talking again. "Okay, you definitely have to start with *The Hobbit*..."

El smiled, trying to make a mental note of the most interesting titles as he prattled about his favorite book series. She'd never remember all the names, but she liked how enthusiastic he sounded when talking about something he loved. It made her feel like maybe she could grow to love it, too.

And, although she didn't want to get ahead of herself, she couldn't help the thought that crossed her mind: That maybe she could grow to love *him*, too.

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Mike looked at his wristwatch for the fifth time in the last half hour. Unfortunately, he still had twenty-five minutes to go until his shift was over, so he knew he would check at least 4.17 more times before he could finally go home.

It had been one of those days from hell at work, not in terms of how many people came into the store, but in terms of the quality of people that did. It was a Tuesday, so the volume of customers they got was a fraction of what they usually got later in the week, but it seemed like the worst kind of customers had all come to an agreement to stop by in the same day.

People who were clueless but still wouldn't accept that he knew more about the devices they were buying than they did. People who knew what they were talking about but then complained that their selection wasn't as sophisticated as they required. People who whined about their prices being too high and tried to haggle them down like they were at a flea market instead of an established electronics store. People who came in to return items they damaged due to their own stupidity in ways that voided the warranty, and yet would not take no for an answer.

Working in retail was hell. Sure, the job paid well, the schedule was flexible, his boss was nice, and sometimes he got to tinker around with the merchandise, but days like today made him more determined than ever to finish his degree so he could get a high-end technical job that didn't involve dealing with *people* on a daily basis.

No, he was being unfair. While it was true that working in retail was a nightmare sometimes, he knew today's mood had less to do with that than it had to do with wanting to get home already so he could make a very important call, as he had for days.

Eleven days.

Ever since that Saturday when he couldn't make it to their movie date, he'd been calling El every night just to talk to her, chat about their respective days and whatever was going on in their respective lives. And even after eleven straight days of spending hours at a time listening to her, learning who she was and what she liked and how she felt about things— even after all of that, he couldn't imagine ever not wanting to talk to her, he couldn't imagine ever getting tired of it.

There was something about El that was infinitely attractive to him. Not just because she was beautiful— although, of course, she was— but also because of her personality. She was just different from everyone else. She was the sweetest person, but she also had a sassy side that never failed to put a grin on his face. She cared about people, she really did, and whenever he heard her talk about her dad, or about Max, or her professors and classmates, he felt the warmth of her affection for them wash over him every time, almost like her empathy was contagious.

Even when she spoke about her classes, interests they didn't share, or situations he had never experienced, he still found himself hanging onto her every word. He could spend hours hearing her talk about some psychological theory he could never even begin to understand, because her enthusiasm was what fascinated him. She enjoyed things without reservation, with an almost innocent glee, and that drew him in like a moth to a flame.

What struck him the most about her, though, was that she seemed just as fascinated by *his* interests; even those she knew nothing about. She wasn't particularly into tech, but she didn't mind when he ranted about some engineering project he couldn't figure out. She had never read any of his favorite books or watched most of his favorite movies or TV shows, but when he explained them to her, she always seemed genuinely curious about them. She'd never heard of D&D, but she was glad to give him constructive criticism (or even throw in some ideas of her own) for a campaign.

For a guy who'd been raised by parents who tried to be supportive but could never entirely understand him (well, at least his mother tried), who'd grown up in the shadow of an older sister who had a 4.0+ GPA and somehow still managed to be popular, who'd had to deal with bullying at school his entire life because of his "nerdy" interests and lack of athletic ability, it was refreshing that there was someone out there who didn't judge him for liking the things he liked.

And yeah, okay, maybe he was getting a little too invested too quickly. His friends (well, Lucas) kept pointing that out to him every other day; they didn't want him to get hurt and, to be fair, the way he talked about her probably did make her sound too good to be true. But could he be blamed, really? She was like no one else he'd ever met. He'd never felt this way before. He wasn't about to miss out on something that could be great just because he was scared of getting hurt.

So, no. He was going to get out of work at five, grab something quick to eat, go home, and then call El at nine. He couldn't wait.

He looked down at his watch again. Twenty minutes now.

He had hoped he could go those last few minutes without any customers walking in, but the electronic chime on the door let him know he had no such luck. Looking up from a Bluetooth speaker's troubleshooting manual he'd been reading for the past few minutes, his eyes landed first on a pair of white high-top Chucks capped with folded-down white socks. He his gaze swept up quickly over shapely calves covered by dark leggings, and at knee height, the hem of a soft-looking light-yellow sundress that cinched at the waist, square neckline partially covered by a long-sleeved jean jacket. And then there was the cascade of brown curls from her ponytail...

A quote from his mother's favorite movie suddenly popped into his mind. *Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world...* He had to wonder at the serendipity of it all, because of all the people he rationally expected to come through the door of the place where he worked with eighteen minutes left to spare on his work shift, he never would've imagined one of them would be her.

"...El?" he asked, his throat dry from the surprise.

Her eyes parted from the shelf filled with headphones she'd been looking at to focus directly on him. "Mike?" she asked when she realized it was him, her eyes widening. "Oh, wow, you'd told me you worked at an electronics store, but I had no idea it was this one!"

All of a sudden she paled, a hand rising to cover her mouth. "Oh no! Max is going to call me a stalker." She shook her head, starting to walk the distance that separated the front door from the counter he was standing behind. "I swear I didn't come here expecting to find you. I just need a cable for my internet," she hurried to explain, almost expecting him to be upset that she was there.

As if that was ever going to happen. "El, it's okay," he assured her, although to be fair he loved the way the embarrassment brought up a flush on the apples of her cheeks. It was adorable. "I'm sure it was just a coincidence. A *good* coincidence, though," he added with a smile. They hadn't been able to meet yet after Spring Break because of their classes, but he'd been dying to see her either way, so the serendipity was more than welcome.

"Yeah?" she asked with a shy smile; his reassurance seemed to have

helped her ease the mortification a little bit.

"Sure," he reiterated eagerly as he stood up and made his way around the counter. "Besides, I'm glad you caught me here. Now I can make sure you get the best quality for your money, unlike other people who will just try to sell you the most expensive item in the store. You said you needed an ethernet cable?" he said, as he gestured for her to follow him to the appropriate aisle.

"I guess so, yeah," she responded, probably tripping a little over the word "ethernet" like most non-tech-savvy people in his life often did. It wasn't a big deal. "Our Wi-Fi has been acting out lately, so I figured I could try and connect my laptop to the internet directly to get around that."

"Do you have a Wi-Fi set up for the whole building, or is it just for your apartment?" Mike asked her over his shoulder as they approached their networking section.

"I believe it's just for our apartment, though I might be wrong," she answered carefully. "It was already set up when we moved in. But I can see the network for the apartment above mine whenever I try to connect. My neighbor called it 'StayPuft1984,'" she added with a snort.

"*Ghostbusters* reference. He or she has good taste," he commented, making a mental note that El knew what *Ghostbusters* was. Could this girl get any cooler? "You know, I could take a look at your router, see if maybe I can figure out what's wrong with your Wi-Fi," he suggested casually.

"Really? You don't have to," she said, looking at him like she didn't want to inconvenience him.

"Yeah, it's not a problem," he insisted. Normally he hated when people around him (usually his family) just assumed that he could solve any tech-related problems they had, like he was their personal Geek Squad. But El hadn't asked him; he'd offered, and he really didn't mind helping her out. "I'll stop by one of these days. You really should get an ethernet cable until then, though. It'll be one of these," he said, signaling at the part of the shelving that held their selection

from his most-trusted brand. "How long does it have to be?"

"Just a few feet should be fine," El replied as she looked at all the networking cable options on the shelves. "The internet... plug... thingy is right by my bed, so I don't need it to be very long or anything." Mike couldn't help but chuckle. Normally people messing up the terminology would annoy him, but on her it was just cute.

"Alright, this one should be good for you, then," he said as he reached up to the highest shelf for a pack of the four-foot-longs. He showed it to her with a smile that she returned. "Come on, I'll check you out."

He stopped abruptly in his steps when what he'd just said actually hit him. "I mean—" he stumbled over his words, very aware that *he* was the one who was probably blushing now. "Uh, I mean— I'll help you with the checkout," he corrected, his face blazing.

Thankfully she didn't seem to take offense regarding his unintentional innuendo, because she laughed. "Yes, I gathered that," she said, nodding her head. "Lead the way," she added, gesturing toward the counter he'd been sitting at when she came in, which also held one of their POS terminals.

He quickly processed her order, letting her use his employee discount, too. It wasn't like she was saving a lot with just the one item, but hey, what his boss didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Mike hardly ever used it, anyway. "Here you go," he said as he handed her a small recyclable bag with the Hong Electronics logo on the front and her ethernet cable inside.

"Thank you," she replied, but she didn't leave right away like most other customers would; instead, she lingered for a moment longer. "So... I'll talk to you later tonight?" she asked with a hopeful smile.

"Yeah, of course," he was quick to confirm over the loud beating of his heart. Knowing that, even though they'd already seen each other that day, she still wanted him to call her at their usual time, made him feel like he could fly.

She nodded, giving him a small wave before turning on her heel and starting to make her way to the main entrance, ponytail swaying

behind her. She was about halfway there when Mike decided he had to say something. Anything. He just wanted to keep talking to her, wanted her to stay with him for a little while longer.

"Hey, El?" he called out, unaware that he was leaning his entire weight forward on the counter until he realized belatedly that the slightly rough surface of the laminate countertop was scratchy against his elbows.

She stopped and turned to look at him expectantly, and it was only then that he figured out what to say. "Um, my shift ends in, like, five minutes..." he started, "so I was wondering— if you don't have any other plans, that is, and don't mind waiting for a bit—" He straightened up. "I was wondering if maybe you'd like to go grab a bite with me or something?" he asked, hoping with every fiber of his being that she said yes.

Her grin was brilliant in a way that made his stomach do a funny swoop— which wasn't necessarily a new thing when she was nearby, but then again, they had only met face-to-face one other time. "Sure! I'd love to," she responded, and if a minute ago Mike had felt buoyant enough to fly, now he felt like he was on cloud nine.

She told him she'd wait for him outside because she wanted to call Max and let her know that she wouldn't be home for dinner. No other customers came into the store in the time Mike had left on his shift, so at five o'clock on the dot he let Mr. Hong, who was in the back working on some of the repair orders, know that he was on his way out. The usually jovial old man waved him goodbye without even looking up from the telephone unit he was working on.

El was already done with her call when he made his way outside. "Okay, we're good to go," he let her know. "Did you want to go to any particular place, or..." he trailed off. "Earlier I was just thinking I'd stop by a fast food place on the way home, but if you'd like to go somewhere else, I'm down."

"There's a diner near here that I really love," she informed him, and now that he thought about it, he was pretty sure he'd seen the place she was talking about before; he'd just never been. But one could never go wrong with diner food, right? Burgers and fries and



milkshakes... sounded pretty good to him.

"All right," he nodded. "Lead the way," he gestured in the direction he thought he remembered the diner being, and they started walking. He noticed her cheeks turned pink, and he knew she was remembering his blunder from earlier, but then she let out the most delightful giggle, and he decided right then and there that as long as he could put that pretty blush and a smile on her face, he didn't mind making an idiot out of himself.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Ugh, okay, two more chapters because I'm a goddamned sucker who can't keep her word count under control. D= But I swear, that is *it!* \*puts her foot down\*

Again, several intentional, if somewhat indirect, references to the show here that I won't list because I would never finish, but I just want to make note of one in case someone isn't aware of this: 3 + 5 + 3 = 11 (...as in days).

"Mickey" is a 1982 song by Toni Basil; it came in at no. 36 in the Billboard hot 100 for 1983, and even decades later it's guaranteed to stick in your brain—I regret nothing. Steena Holmes is a Canadian author best known for her *Finding Emma* series; I've never read any of her books (much like Mike, it's not really the type of stuff I read) but I know people who really love them. The "Of all the gin joints" quote is from the 1942 film *Casablanca*. "StayPuft1984" is a reference to the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man from *Ghostbusters*, which of course was released in 1984. Geek Squad is an electronics diagnostics/repair subsidiary of Best Buy.

Thanks as always for all the support! I love hearing from you in comments, on my Twitter [@girls\\_are\\_weird](#), and on my Tumblr [@girls-are-](#)

[weird](#). Be sure to let me know what you think of this one, as well!

## 4. Disclosure

### Notes for the Chapter:

This is a modern-day AU, and thus completely unrelated to any of my previous stories in the [Quiet Moments](#) series. Just wanted to make sure that's clear so there's no confusion. Also, El's powers, as well as any Upside Down elements, do not exist in this story.

Also, a teeeeeny bit of angst here, and mentions of past child abuse (nothing worse than we've already seen in the show), because I don't think El is El without some kind of tragic backstory. Sorry, girl.  
=(

As Mike and El made their way out of the diner, they decided to walk to El's apartment rather than take the train. They also decided to take the long road through the park rather than through campus— or, well, Mike suggested it, because he didn't want their evening together to be over too soon. He didn't say that out loud, of course, but then again, she said yes. Maybe he wasn't the only one trying to stretch their time together as much as possible.

"I'm sorry, but that's just wrong," she commented teasingly as they made their way down a side street toward the park, talking about his habit of pouring syrup on his scrambled eggs. When they first arrived at Benny's Burgers, Mike had been intending to have a burger for dinner, but El was so insistent that she wanted waffles, that he couldn't help but give in, and they ended up sharing a breakfast platter between the two of them.

He scoffed. "Says the girl who wanted breakfast for dinner?" he asked, smirking as he shook his head. "Somewhere in Indiana, my mother is having an aneurysm."

"You're from Indiana?" El asked as they reached the archway that was the side gate of the park. Mike thought he'd mentioned that little

detail before, but perhaps he hadn't, given how curious she sounded. "Where in Indiana, exactly?"

"Oh, you probably have never heard of it," he answered with a dismissive shrug. In his experience, people usually hadn't. "It's a really small town called Hawkins."

El's eyes widened. "No way!" she exclaimed suddenly, and it almost startled him. It sounded like she recognized the name, and if she did, she'd be the first person Mike had met in the city who did. "I *do* know it! I think that's where my dad is from," she explained excitedly.

To say that Mike was stunned was an understatement. "Whoa, seriously?"

"Yes!" El returned with a grin. "I've never been, though. I don't think Dad has been back there since he moved out after high school," she added as they made their way past the flower gardens. The pastel-yellow color of her sundress stood out against the bed of greens.

"It's good that you haven't visited; it's the most boring place on Earth. Nothing ever happens in Hawkins," he mumbled as he put his hands in the pockets of his jacket. It wasn't as chilly as it had been over the past couple of days, but it still wasn't *warm*. It could be worse, he guessed; at least it wasn't raining. "Small world, though. What's his name? Maybe my parents know him."

"Jim," she let him know, entwining her hands behind her back as she walked. "Jim Hopper. They might know him just as Hopper, though. Or Hop. That's what everyone calls him. Even I call him that sometimes, even though it's my last name, too."

Mike chuckled. "Your dad lets you call him by his nickname *and* have breakfast for dinner?" He shook his head. "He sounds like a really cool guy." Especially in comparison to his own father, who was the epitome of *uncool*, Mike thought, but he didn't say that out loud, either.

"Well, he *tries* to be strict," El pointed out, "but deep down he's really just a big softy. And to be fair, the breakfast-for-dinner thing was

mostly me," she admitted with a quick nod of her head to the side. "He's a cop, you see. Chief of Police. So sometimes he got called into work at night, and I was left to reheat frozen dinners for myself, but I would toast some Eggos instead and eat that. Especially if all we had were peas." She crinkled her nose in the most adorable way. "Frozen peas are the worst. I still can't stand peas to this day."

He laughed. "And your mom didn't have a problem with that?" He was still chuckling when he saw her smile fall. "Oh. Um... did I say something wrong?" he asked, now worried that he might have inadvertently offended her in some way. Had she ever mentioned her mother before in any of their conversations? He honestly couldn't remember.

"No, it's not you," she hurried to clarify, as if she didn't want him to get the wrong impression. "It's just that..." She took a deep breath. "My mother isn't really... in the picture," she revealed, visibly measuring her words carefully.

*Crap*, Mike thought, mentally kicking himself. So this was what she meant when she said that her father was pretty much the only family she had. Did that mean her mother was dead, and he'd just unknowingly brought it up at the worst possible moment? "I'm sorry," he apologized quickly, not wanting to upset her. "Just forget I asked, okay?"

"It's okay," she assured him, shaking her head and attempting a smile. "You didn't know. It's fine."

They continued along the park's walkways, but the dynamic between them was noticeably altered. For the first time since they had met, Mike could feel the air between them vibrate uncomfortably, and it ate him up on the inside that he'd made things awkward when everything was going so well earlier.

A father with two children walked past them; one was just a baby, carried in his father's arms, while the other one, maybe two or three years older, was pushing the baby's empty carriage while dressed in a full Batman costume. Mike and El had to step slightly to the side to let them pass, and he saw El give the costumed kid a smile when he

walked in front of her.

Her reaction sparked a memory in Mike's mind. "Hey, did I ever tell you about that one time when the guys and I dressed up for Halloween and only realized too late that nobody else in the entire school was wearing costumes that year?"

The curious glint in her eyes was enough to launch him straight into the story about that one time the four of them ended up walking down the hallways of Hawkins Middle in full DC superhero regalia on a day not a single other student had thought of dressing up despite the holiday.

(Actually, make that three superheroes, because both he and Lucas showed up dressed up as the Flash, despite the fact that they had *totally, absolutely, definitively* agreed *weeks* before that Lucas was going to be Green Lantern).

"We never wore costumes to school again," he concluded as El laughed so hard her eyes teared up. Mike didn't even mind; after a few years of disappearing in the rearview mirror, the memory had become quite hilarious to himself and all three of his best friends, in a somewhat self-deprecating manner. "Actually, we never did the whole group costume thing again. Although Dustin definitely tried the next year. He ended up having to trick or treat as Chewbacca all on his own."

She gave him what he interpreted as a confounded look, and he realized she might not have gotten the reference. "Ah, sorry—Chewbacca is a character from *Star Wars*. Big hairy creature? You know, the one from that video of the lady with the toy mask that was going around a few years ago—"

"I know who Chewie is," El interrupted him, thankfully before he started making the Wookiee sounds (Dustin was much better at those than he was). "I just can't believe Dustin would still *insist*." She turned to him with a sassy, smirky kind of smile, the kind he often imagined when they were talking on the phone. "Everybody knows *Star Wars*, Mike," she added, shaking her head at him as if amused.

Mike wasn't sure if it was because of that smile or her assertion—maybe both— but his heart started beating a mile a minute. He wasn't as certain as she was about the reach of the *Star Wars* franchise (sure, it was way more mainstream these days than it was when the original trilogy came out, but he wouldn't go as far as to say *everybody* knew it), but regardless, he was damn glad that *she* knew what it was.

*I could really fall in love with this girl*, the thought jumped unbidden to the forefront of his mind.

"It was a good thing Dustin didn't win that argument, though," he added in reference to her disbelieving remark earlier. "We were made fun of relentlessly for the rest of the year. Even into high school," he admitted somewhat reluctantly.

She frowned as if offended on his behalf. "That's awful."

He shrugged. "That's high school," he declared. "We're geeks. If it hadn't been that, it would've been something else." The frown was still marked on her face as he looked at her. "Didn't they have cliques at your school? I bet you were one of the popular kids," he wagered, because of course she would be.

He expected her to chuckle, maybe roll her eyes, but all she did was shake her head. "I wasn't."

As much as he tried, he couldn't imagine that. El was pretty, bubbly, smart, funny... intriguing in a way that attracted attention whenever she walked into a room. Of course the popular kids would gravitate toward her, immediately want her to be a part of their fold. "I find that hard to believe," he told her. Not that he was doubting her, but maybe she didn't realize how popular she'd been. Sometimes people couldn't see that sort of thing from the inside.

She, however, only shook her head again. "I didn't go to high school," she said. Before Mike could ask what she meant, she elaborated. "I was homeschooled."

Her expression was serious, and once again Mike wondered if he had

screwed up somehow. "Oh," he said dumbly. "I didn't know that." Not that there was anything wrong with being homeschooled, of course—he just had never met anyone who was.

She chuckled, but without any mirth to the gesture, if such a thing was possible. "I know," she said, an undercurrent of what Mike thought sounded almost like disappointment in her voice. "That was on purpose."

Noticing his confused expression, she explained. "It's just one of those things... like my mother, or how my family came to be... it's all related. And to be honest, it's kind of a downer." She looked down at her feet momentarily. "Not the kind of thing that usually comes up on a first date."

Mike was torn. On the one hand, he was elated to have confirmation that she thought of their impromptu dinner as a date, and didn't want to push too hard and ruin that. On the other hand, even though they'd only known each other a little over a week, he really thought this attraction between them could go somewhere. He really did want to learn as much as he could about her, and that included the good and the bad and the uncomfortable. And having these topics come up in casual conversation clearly bothered her. So why not start disclosure early?

"I understand," was what he finally settled on. She looked up at him when he said that, seeming hopeful. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, it's okay. Although..." He stopped walking. She stopped as well, about a step ahead. "You know, I'm here to listen if you ever *do* want to talk about it," he offered sincerely, smiling down at her. "I won't judge. There's no such thing as a perfect family. I know that from experience," he added in a resigned mumble. God knew even his all-American high-middle-class nuclear family had its fair share of issues to deal with.

"Besides, I..." Now he was the one who was looking down at his feet. "I really like you," he admitted earnestly, if a little bashfully. When he raised his gaze, he found her flushed as well, biting her lower lip in a manner he found frankly enticing. He grinned. "Honestly, I think there's virtually nothing you could tell me that could change that."



She didn't seem so sure. She stared at him for a long while, as if gauging the sincerity of his assertion, and Mike briefly worried he had pushed too hard and she wouldn't want to talk to him ever again. But then she nodded. "Okay," she said in a small voice. "Um... do you mind if we go sit somewhere? This isn't... it's not something I've told very many people, and I'd rather not be overheard," she added, gesturing to a woman who was just making her way past them, the third person that had passed by on the walkway since they stopped.

"Yeah, of course. Privacy. I get it." He looked around them, searching for a place where they could talk without coming within hearing distance of other fellow pedestrians. "How about there?" he suggested, pointing in the direction of a patch of land where the Park District authority had installed a group of picnic tables for families to use overlooking the small pond on the other side of the walkway.

She nodded, and they quickly made their way to the nearest table before someone else had the same idea.

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El's heart was beating almost out of her chest as she sat down at the picnic table, arranging herself sideways, as did Mike, so that they could properly face each other as the conversation unfolded.

She was terrified.

There were only a handful of people who knew the full story of where she came from and how she came to be Jane Hopper: Her dad, of course, knew everything because he'd been there; Dr. Owens because he treated her after the whole ordeal; her therapist, who had treated her for years in the aftermath; and lastly Max, because if they were going to live together she probably deserved to know why El sometimes woke up screaming in the middle of the night.

But she'd never told anyone else, let alone any of the handful of guys

she'd been on a date with over the past two and a half years. She'd never been interested enough to care for a second date with any of them, so she saw no point in delving too deep into her past with any of them, either.

And yet, somehow, it was different with Mike. He was the first guy she'd cared about enough to even consider sharing this with. She didn't know if this... relationship— for lack of a better term, since it was so new— would last, but she hoped it would, and even if it didn't, she knew he would keep her secret. Somehow, even having only known him for a little over a week, she believed him when he said he would listen without judging.

She knew it was a lot to dump on a person who probably wasn't prepared for something that dark. And she dreaded him getting scared off or looking at her with pity. That would hurt her terribly. But if she wanted this... this something between them to go somewhere, it was probably better for him to know early on, so he could decide if he wanted to brave things with her, or go his own way. It was only fair. He didn't need to carry her burdens if he felt he couldn't handle the weight.

Plus, maybe it would be good for her to tell someone other than those who already knew. Maybe it would make it easier for next time. Her therapist always told her talking it out could be cathartic. And since she wasn't talking *to* her therapist as often these days, her dad wasn't great at *emotions*, and she rarely brought it up with Max (she had family issues of her own and El didn't want to spark any painful memories for her), maybe Mike could be the helpful ear she sometimes longed for.

If he still wanted to be around her after she told him, that is.

Mike was waiting patiently for her to start speaking, so she took a deep breath and steeled herself. The story always started in the same place, anyway. "When I was a child... I was abused," she admitted carefully. Immediately, she saw the openness in Mike's expression shutter down, his brow drawing into a frown.

"Not sexually—" she hurried to add. She knew from the few times she had told this story that sexual abuse was always the first place

everyone's mind went, and she had learned to nip that in the bud quickly. "Just... just psychologically, I guess. My pa—" She cut herself off before she could reflexively use the term of affection she had sworn to herself she would never, ever, use again. "The man who was raising me," she corrected, "kept me trapped inside our house at all times. I couldn't go out, not even to school; I couldn't even peek outside through a window, and when I misbehaved—" Once again she had to stop and correct herself from a conditioning that was truly hard to shake. "—when he *said* I misbehaved, he would throw me into a tiny room with no windows and leave me in there for days, only giving me enough food and water to make sure I didn't die."

Mike's eyes widened, and his mouth hung open, and she was scared, so scared, that he would look at her differently that she lowered her gaze to her hands in her lap. "When I was twelve," she continued, "my dad— Hopper, that is— got wind of what was happening and led the police on a raid to get me out of there." She swallowed hard. "He saved me. The man who abused me was killed in the raid," she added in a quiet tone, almost under her breath. She didn't even want to remember the face of the man who still haunted her nightmares.

"We did find my biological mother— that man had stolen me from her when I was a baby," she explained, finally coming to the answer of one of his earlier questions. "We found her, but she wasn't... well. She wasn't in a position to take care of herself, let alone a daughter." She didn't want to get too deep into her mother's illness; she wasn't sure she could explain it right, and she figured the details weren't exactly crucial to his understanding of the rest of the story, anyway.

"So my dad adopted me," she finally came to the good— well, better — part of the story. "I wanted to go to school, but it became clear really quickly that I wasn't ready." She pursed her lips, remembering those days of constant learning, and how wonderful they felt to her. "I had a lot to learn if I wanted to catch up. When I did... even when I was ready academically, I still had to deal with flashbacks, and I would get anxiety attacks sometimes when I got scared or when there were too many people around. So Dad thought that homeschooling would be the best thing for me."

She sighed. "I really wanted to go to high school, see if it really was like it seemed on TV," she added with a wistful smile. "But I never

could. It was only when I got my diploma that I felt I was ready to... be out in the real world, I guess. So I decided I would come to the city for college, and Dad agreed it was a good compromise. Far enough from home that I could feel independent, but close enough that I could go back if I ever needed to."

She shrugged, still looking down at her hands. "Dad worries a lot. And he should, I guess. It was the best decision I ever made, but it hasn't been easy," she admitted, worrying her lower lip for a moment. "It took me a long time to internalize the idea that I wasn't trapped anymore. That I was free. That I could... want things. Have a family. Make friends." She looked up at him between her lashes. "Fall in love."

"El," he breathed out hoarsely, and she lifted her gaze enough that she was staring straight into his eyes. He wasn't looking at her with pity, as she'd feared earlier. He didn't seem disgusted or uncomfortable, either. Instead, his gaze was intense with several other feelings she hadn't expected. Concern, mainly, and a lot of surprise, but she thought she could also see some anger— not directed at her, but the familiar type of anger she would see in her father or Max whenever her past reared its head: anger at the man who hurt her, anger at the world for being so cruel, anger at themselves for not coming into her life sooner, for not being there to help her earlier.

She hadn't expected intensity like this from anyone but those two people, but here Mike Wheeler was, defying all her expectations.

He reached out to grab hold of one of her hands, entwining his long, slender fingers with hers so delicately that she felt a shiver run down her spine. "El," he repeated, his dark eyes even darker in the dim lighting of the park lights as he spoke earnestly, "you know that you *deserve* all of that, right?"

Her breath caught, and she felt a rush of affection for him so overwhelming that she almost felt dizzy. The corners of her lips drew up without her even realizing it, and she stretched out a hand— the one that wasn't currently holding his— to cup his cheek. Then she leaned forward and pressed her lips against his.

The kiss was soft, just the slightest touch of her mouth against his plush, if a little dry, lips. She felt him exhale against her cheek as he leaned into the gesture, returning the gentle touch so sweetly that she thought she could melt into him.

She was the one to pull back, but even so, she didn't fight the urge to remain close, leaning her forehead against his for a minute longer. "Thank you," she said breathlessly as she slowly opened her eyes, feeling like she was waking up from a pleasant dream.

"...For what?" he asked, sounding a little dazed. His own eyes remained closed, long eyelashes brushing against his freckles.

She smiled. "For not running for the hills?" she suggested, only a little bit teasingly. At her words, he opened his eyes and stared at her like she'd done something incredibly amazing for *him* instead of the other way around.

Then he grinned, that boyish grin of his she'd been daydreaming about for her entire Spring Break. "After that? No way!" he said, his laughter so contagious that it induced giggling on her part. Once the mirth died down a little, she saw his eyes flit down to look at her lips for just a second. "Can I—"

"Yes," was all she had to say before he leaned in and captured her mouth with his.

This second kiss was deeper, more involved, his lips caressing hers insistently as she responded just as enthusiastically. His grip on her hand tightened, and his other one, still free, rose up to hold the back of her neck, the tips of his fingers just grazing the hair at her nape, causing a shudder to run down her spine.

She couldn't hold back a blissful sigh as they separated, meeting his elated gaze with just as much fervor. "Wow," he said, and really, El couldn't think of a better way to sum up the electricity crackling between them at the moment. It was just wow.

"Yeah," she agreed, and then they were both laughing, leaning into each other like sneaky little children with a secret.

They remained that way even after the laughter died down, just sitting there in silence— not an uncomfortable silence, not at all— hands entwined, looking out at the pond in front of them and studying the people passing by, until Mike finally declared, "It's getting late." He turned to her again, looking for all the world like he didn't want to be saying what he was about to say. "I guess we should get you home."

El agreed, a little disappointed because had it been up to her, she would've wanted to stretch this night forever, but also resigned that their date would have to come to an end soon enough; Max would be worried if she took too long getting home, and El didn't want to alarm her best friend.

They stood, made their way back to the walkway and started their trek back to El's apartment, joined hands swinging between them as they walked. "Can I ask you a question?" Mike spoke up a couple of minutes into their walk, somewhat tentative.

El nodded. She didn't mind; she had in fact been surprised that he hadn't asked any questions when she finished recounting her story. She had expected him to. There had to be many details he wanted to know more about, and now that the hard part was out of the way, it was easier to fill in any blanks.

His question, however, when it did come, surprised her. "Is that why you're majoring in Psychology? Because of what happened to you?" She had to admit she was a little stunned. She knew he was really smart, but she hadn't expected him to connect those dots so quickly. It was unreal how attuned to her he was already, even after knowing her for just over a week.

"Yes," she confessed with a nod. "That's a big part of it, yeah. I mean, I love Psychology— learning how people think is super interesting," she expanded. "But it's also because I want to... well, I want to help kids like me," she concluded. She had already made up her mind to specialize in child and family therapy, for that precise reason.

She looked up at him. "What about you? What made you decide to go into Engineering?"

Mike shrugged. "I don't know. I've just always liked it." He looked pensive for a moment. "The guys and I were in the A/V club when we were in school. We were the only members," he admitted with a chuckle.

"You've said," she retorted with an amused smile, recalling that during one of their phone conversations he'd recounted one time when he and his roommates had replaced the power source on a radio transmitter and the thing had burst into flames the second time they tried to use it.

"I've always been more into science, I guess," he confirmed with a quirk of his head. He was silent for a moment before he added, "Or maybe it's because no one else in my family is into it. Maybe I just wanted to be different."

A thought occurred to her as she heard him say that. "Is that why you signed up for Geek on Fleek?" she asked him as they crossed under the archway that marked the side gate of the park opposite to the one they had walked in through. "So you could meet someone who liked science, too?"

She was almost afraid to ask, suddenly keenly aware that, save for movies where giant dinosaurs escaped containment and started eating people, they really had very few shared interests (and even then, they both loved the killer dinosaur movie for different reasons). It didn't feel that way when they were talking, but surely every relationship needed to stand on *some* commonalities. What if the novelty eventually fizzled out and they had no common interests to fall back on? She didn't even want to imagine that. Not after tonight.

To her eternal relief, his immediate answer was a grimace. "Nah. That was all Nancy." She didn't understand what his older sister had to do with anything, and it must've shown on her face because he promptly explained. "When I went back to Hawkins for Christmas break, she gave me a lecture about how I'm not 'socializing enough'—" He did the air quotes with two fingers of his free hand as he rolled his eyes. "—And that I'm 'wasting my college experience' by having my nose stuck to my computer screen or something. So she decided she was going to sign me up for a dating service."

El couldn't help a giggle. "You didn't want her to?"

"Not even a little," he declared with a shake of his head. "But then I started getting matches, and the guys kept telling me I might as well try it out, and... I guess I gave in to peer pressure. Whatever. It happens to the best of us," he mumbled under his breath. "I don't even know what my profile says."

Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks, eyes wide like he'd seen a ghost. "Oh God, she didn't write something totally embarrassing, did she? She didn't, like, upload a bunch of naked baby pictures of me or anything?"

He sounded so anxious that she burst out into loud laughter. "I don't know, I haven't seen it," she managed to huff out between guffaws. She'd been so focused on her interactions with him that she hadn't even thought to ask Max why she'd been matched with him. She took a deep breath in an attempt to calm down. "But now I think I'm gonna have to look it up!" she declared, fit of laughter starting anew.

In response he groaned. "I am deleting that thing as soon as I get home tonight," he declared, the determination in his tone only making her laugh harder.

As she finally managed to get her laughter under control, she looked up to find him smiling down at her, one of those soft smiles people got when staring at something endearing. She felt herself flush, which only made him smile wider.

He tugged at her hand, pulling her forward so they could continue walking. "In all seriousness, do you think I should delete my profile?" he asked in a rather vague manner. "It's looking like I'm not going to be needing it all that much."

*Because he'd met her*, was clearly implied in that statement, and it made her smile uncontrollably. "Yeah, you should," she replied, letting go of his hand only to hold onto his elbow instead. "I don't think you need it anymore." He grinned down at her again, and it sent her heart aflutter. With a contented sigh, she rested her head against his forearm as they walked.



They continued chatting about everything and nothing as they made their way to El's apartment building. Mike agreed to stop by on Friday between his morning class and his afternoon lab to check their Wi-Fi router, and El asked him to think of places they could go or activities they could try on a second date— she'd picked both the movie they never got to see and the diner they had waffles at today, so she figured it was only fair they got to do something he suggested next time around.

Maybe it wasn't really about what they had in common, she thought. Maybe it was more about who the person was, and whether or not that inspired you to learn to enjoy the things they enjoyed. And with Mike, El felt like she could easily do that.

By the time they made it back to her place, they were both actively trying to walk slower in order to delay their goodbyes as much as possible. Eventually, though, they did make it to her door, and the separation was imminent.

He mumbled almost sadly that he'd see her soon, and in response she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, slow and meaningful. Now that they were both standing up, she had to lift herself on her tiptoes to reach his lips, but she didn't mind— especially not when his own arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her close.

With a "Bye" whispered against his lips, she opened her door and walked inside, feeling like she was walking on air.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I filched the bit where both Mike and Lucas ended up dressed as the Flash from an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, back when it was still funny. The video Mike talks about, with the lady with the Chewbacca mask, is a real video that went viral a couple years ago; if you look up "Chewbacca Mom" on Youtube or Google I'm sure you'll find it straight away.

The next chapter will be the last one for this story for sure. There's still one important person for El to

meet, and one particular activity they haven't been able to get to, so be sure to stay tuned for that!

## 5. Jurassic World

### Notes for the Chapter:

This is a modern-day AU, and thus completely unrelated to any of my previous stories in the [Quiet Moments](#) series. Just wanted to make sure that's clear so there's no confusion. Also, El's powers, as well as any Upside Down elements, do not exist in this story.

El took a deep breath as she raised a hand to knock on the door, hoping against hope that this was the right dorm room.

She knew Mike lived in Levy Hall because he'd mentioned it during one of their phone conversations, and that he was on the ground level because he often complained about drunk people making noise outside his window while he was trying to sleep or study. There were four units in that floor, though, and she wasn't sure which one was his, so she was going to assume the one that was labeled "Party Central" right under the unit number was theirs, and hope for the best.

(Because "party" as in a *Dungeons & Dragons* party. Get it? Because that was apparently a thing in the game the four of them loved to play.)

She knocked and waited, praying that it would be Mike on the other side, but just hoping that if she got it wrong, whoever opened the door wouldn't yell at her. It took a bit, but after a minute or so, a guy about her age with brown hair parted to the side and a polite smile opened the door. He also had a cast on the lower half of his right leg and was propping himself up on crutches.

"Hi, is Mike here?" she asked tentatively, though admittedly a bit less nervous since the guy didn't seem to mind her knocking at his door. "Mike Wheeler?" she clarified, just in case there were any other Mikes on this floor.

"Ah, um, he's not home right now," the guy replied easily, not seeming bothered by her sudden presence at his dorm. "He's probably on his way back from work."

"Oh," El said, taking her cell phone out of the pocket of her bookbag to check the time. It was 5:37. She knew Mike worked until 5 pm on Thursdays, so she figured she'd find him home if she stopped by a little after five. Clearly she'd underestimated the time it took to get from the electronics store to his dormitory, or maybe he just had to make a pitstop somewhere along the way. Either way, she would have to stop by later.

The guy, who she now assumed was Will, Mike's third roommate, was still staring at her, his smile now slightly warmer. "You must be El," he stated with a grin, and she was about to ask him how he knew that, but then she remembered that Dustin and Lucas had told her that Mike spoke about her all the time, so it should be no surprise that Will knew about her, too.

She nodded, hoping she wasn't blushing. "You must be Will," she retorted, giving him a warm smile right back. She had now officially met all of Mike's best friends, and she thought that was really cool. She liked to tease him that he had met all her friends (aka, just Max) before he met her. Now they were even.

Will laughed. "I am. What gave me away?" he asked, lifting one of his crutches slightly in jest. After all, how many other friends of Mike's were there out there with broken legs? There could only be so many bicycle accidents around Mike before his life started looking like a *Final Destination* movie.

"If you want, you can just wait for him inside," Will suggested helpfully, pointing behind him with his thumb. "He should be back soon." El accepted his offer, relieved both because Will seemed like a nice guy and because she wouldn't have to go elsewhere and come back later. That would have been a pain.

As Will led her inside she took notice of the layout of the place. It was bigger than most dorms she'd seen when she first visited the campus with her dad before her freshman year, more of a dorm *suite*

than a room, although she didn't know if she would characterize it as *big*, per se, because even though it had something of a "common room," it was still tiny compared to the living room in her own apartment.

On each side of the common room there was a door, two of them total, which she assumed led to the bedrooms. Directly in front of the front door, pushed up against the window, there was a desk, which apparently came with one of those cheap ergonomic-in-name-only chairs. In the wall between the desk and the door to El's right there was a minifridge on the floor and a small three-level bookshelf right beside it. On the opposite wall there was a small table that looked like it was supposed to be for eating, but she didn't think they used it much for that purpose, given that the tabletop was cluttered with a small microwave oven, an electric kettle, and a 4-slice toaster. A bright red bean bag was shoved under the table, and two plastic chairs were stacked together and pushed against the wall beside the table.

"You can wait for him here," Will said, signaling to the table. "Would you mind pulling out a chair? It's hard to do with the crutches—" El hurried to help him out, not wanting him to bother on her account. Soon enough they were both sitting down by the table, El looking down at the time on her cell phone again as Will played with the electric cord of the water kettle.

"So," Will started pluckily after a minute or so of only slightly awkward silence, "Mike told me your dad is from Hawkins. Jim Hopper, you said?" El blinked, not expecting that to come out of his mouth of all things, but assented regardless. Will grinned. "You know, I think my mom knows him."

"Oh wow, really?" El replied, now grinning enthusiastically herself. Her dad didn't talk much about his childhood or his hometown, so it would be really fun if she could learn a little about the people he grew up with, his family, what he was like when he was a kid. "That is so cool. What's her name?"

"Joyce Byers," Will relayed, "although he probably knew her by her maiden name back then." He leaned forward as much as his

outstretched injured leg allowed him to, stage-whispering to her in an almost conspiratorial manner, "I think they may have dated in high school."

"No way!" El retorted, sure that her eyes were as large as plates. "Oh, wait until I call dad tomorrow. I'm gonna squeeze him for all the details." She shook her head as she laughed. "I can't believe I didn't know about this!"

"Whatever you squeeze out of him, let me know," Will requested eagerly. "Mom got all babbly when I asked her about it, and she only gets like that when she's really flustered." He smirked. "I think whatever happened between them must've been really intense—"

Whatever words he'd been about to use to qualify their parents' teenage relationship got interrupted as the front door opened and Mike came in, a red beanie on his head and his messenger bag slung across his long torso.

"Hey, Will, are we running out of instant ramen? I could—" He cut himself off when he realized Will wasn't alone. "Oh. El, hey. I didn't... I didn't know you were stopping by today..." he said as he closed the door behind him, standing somewhat awkwardly in front of them.

El was just about to explain her reasons when Will spoke up again. "Geez, Mike. It's not always about you, you know?" he quipped with a teasing grin. "El and I were just working out our *Parent Trap* scheme to get our parents together."

She knew Will was just joking, of course, but just the mere idea of trying such a thing was hysterical, so she burst out into laughter. Mike obviously didn't get it, though, because he looked between them both with the most befuddled expression El had ever seen, and uttered, "What."

"It's a long story," Will said with a chuckle, "I'll tell you later." His intervention gave El time for her laughter to die down, and when she was able to breathe normally again, she was able to pull the DVD case out of her bookbag.

Mike's eyes widened in recognition. "Oh. Yeah, that's cool," he said, understanding her intentions straight away. He took off his messenger bag and set it down on the desk, El's gaze following as he moved about the room. "Um, well, Dustin and Lucas are at the library working on a project for their Mechanics class, so they probably won't get back until late, but Will—"

"—will make himself scarce," Will finished the sentence for him before Mike could, El suspected, invite him to watch the movie with them. Balancing his weight against the table, he pushed himself up to his feet— erm, to his good foot, at least— and grabbed his crutches. "I have to work on an assignment for Conceptual Drawing, anyway, so I'll just be in my room."

He made his way to the door of his bedroom and opened it with a practiced ease that El wasn't sure she would be able to manage were she the one on crutches. "Have fun, you two. It was nice to finally meet you, El!" he added with a bright smile, which El reciprocated before he tipped his door closed with one of his crutches.

Mike had been following Will's departure with his gaze as well, and when the door closed, he turned to El with a slightly embarrassed expression. "I swear I don't eat instant noodles for dinner every night," he said sheepishly.

El couldn't help but chuckle. "Mike, my favorite food is frozen waffles. It's fine." She looked at the door behind which Will had disappeared. "Friday classes?" she asked, nodding in the direction of Will's door curiously.

"Will? Nah," Mike shrugged. "But he's in Visual Arts so he's always got some kind of art project going on. He'll lock himself in there with his headphones on for the rest of the night while he draws." He grabbed his bag off the desk and signaled for her to follow him. "Come on. Watching movies out here is super uncomfortable, so I usually just watch them on my laptop in my room. We can do that if it's okay with you."

"Sounds good," she agreed, shouldering her bag and following him into his room, which she noticed was barely big enough to fit two

twin beds, each one pushed against the wall opposite the other, and one large(-ish) dresser with two columns of drawers on the wall directly opposite to the door. There was no bathroom to be seen, as it was probably communal, one for each floor of the building. El could never wrap her mind around the idea of sharing a bathroom with a bunch of strangers; that was one of the main reasons why she begged her father to help her get an apartment off-campus rather than stay at the dorms.

She knew Mike and Lucas shared a room because Mike had told her the story of how they chose their respective roommates— namely that Dustin snored louder than a chainsaw and Will was the only one out of the three of them who was nice enough to be willing to share with him— so when Mike dropped his bag in a corner and sat down on one of the beds, she emulated him carefully. She didn't want to disturb any of Lucas's things.

She waved the DVD at him once more before she sat down. "Are you sure this is okay?" she asked him. "I know you have an early class tomorrow." She pushed herself back on the bed so that her back was resting against the wall as Mike set up his computer on Lucas's bed— his idea, not hers. He had one of those big laptops with the 15" screen that were super expensive, but he was really into gaming, so she wasn't surprised.

"It's okay. I mean, it's just one movie, and then maybe we can go down and have dinner somewhere?" he asked her, and she nodded. "Then we should still be done early enough." She was surprised by how comfortable she was in this situation. With her limited experience with dating, you'd think she'd be a lot more nervous about being in a guy's room, but she'd been seeing Mike for a while now and they were a lot more used to each other's ways.

The weekend right after their first date he'd taken her to the planetarium, and it had been quite the experience. If she thought hearing his voice on the phone made her heart beat like crazy, well, it was nothing compared to hearing him whisper in her ear about quasars and supernovas in the darkness that accompanied the event's stunning visuals. They hadn't done anything as big as that in the two weeks since, but they'd hung out a lot; sometimes she would stop by



the electronics store on days he had early shifts so they could have lunch together, and sometimes he'd be waiting for her outside after one of her classes so he could walk her home.

But still... this was his *room*. It felt strangely intimate, though not uncomfortable, she decided as he asked her to hand over the DVD, telling her to grab a couple of pillows so they would be more comfortable. Just the thought of sitting with him on his bed like this made her feel butterflies, but she loved that feeling, and she hoped it never went away so long as she could be near him.

Once he set everything up and the opening scene of *Jurassic World* started playing, he joined her where she was sitting, shoulder to shoulder, stretching his long legs out so his feet hung over the side of the bed. As they watched baby dinosaurs being born on screen, she felt one of his fingers lightly poke at the back of her hand. Her lips curled up unbidden into a smile, and without taking her eyes off the computer screen, she turned her hand over so she could entwine her fingers with his.

When Chris Pratt's character first came on screen, Mike nudged her with his elbow. "Hey, look, it's your boyfriend," he teased her. She did have to admit that *Indiana Jones* style looked good on Chris, but presently El's mind was elsewhere.

"Hmm, I don't know," she said, moving just an inch closer so she could rest her head against Mike's shoulder. Max had once told her she thought Mike's shoulder would be too bony to rest comfortably against, but El had to disagree; it was anything but. Or maybe she'd just found the perfect angle. "Chris might have to get in line. I think someone else might be vying for that title," she added, looking up at his profile.

He smiled— more butterflies fluttered in her stomach— and turned his head so he could gaze down at her. "Yeah?" he asked, and she nodded. "Well, whoever he is must be one lucky dude," he said, playing along.

She couldn't help it— she burst out in giggles. "You're such a sap," she said, hiding her face against his shoulder.

"Well, yeah, but I'm the sap you want to be your boyfriend," he replied, squeezing her hand, and even though she wasn't looking at him, she could hear the grin in his voice. It was one of her favorite things about him.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Well... yeah," she agreed. He smiled back at her before bringing his free hand up to her cheek and leaning in to kiss her softly. She sighed against his lips, enjoying the warm feeling his kisses always created in her.

"Does that mean I can tell the guys that we're official, then?" Mike asked as he pulled back— not too much, just far enough that he could nuzzle her cheek with the tip of her nose. "Not that they haven't been harassing me about it every day since they met you," he added, obviously referring to Dustin and Lucas.

"You can," she graciously accepted in a magnanimous tone, which made him chuckle. "You know, my dad's been calling you my boyfriend since Spring Break. It's only fair that you got some harassment, too," she said, poking him on the side with her free hand.

He pretended to cringe— not at the poke, but rather at her words. "Does that mean I'm gonna have to watch my back if I ever meet him?" he asked, frowning entirely too deeply for it to be real. "I mean, he does own a gun."

"A few of them, actually," she corrected cheekily, making him groan. She laughed. "Don't worry, I'm sure he'll like you," she added, wondering at the fact that they were already talking about him possibly meeting her father even though they'd just become "official" a minute ago. Should that feel weird? "As long as you don't steal any of his cookies, you should be just fine."

"Hey, you *offered* me those!" he retorted straight away, now his turn to poke *her* side instead. Unfortunately for her, she was a lot more ticklish than he was, and a squeal left her mouth immediately, only prompting him to tickle her more.

Their laughter mingled as he kept trying to tickle her and she kept

trying to push him off, which went on for a minute or so until she had laughed so much that she could hardly breathe. Finally he relented, helping to pull her back into a sitting position from where she'd leaned back too far in trying to get away from his mischievous hands. In doing so, however, he pulled her in for another kiss, and El promptly forgot that she'd been gasping for air just a minute ago.

"We're missing the movie," she pointed out as they broke apart for a second, the bellows of several computer-generated dinosaurs on the screen just barely reaching her ears under the insistent drumming of her heart. The protest was half-hearted, though, as she leaned back in to claim his lips as soon as the words left her mouth.

"It's a DVD, we can just play it again later," he argued back very convincingly— or maybe it was just the haze his proximity induced on her brain that was making her very amenable to all kinds of things at the moment. She didn't particularly care which one it was, so long as he didn't stop kissing her.

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Since they weren't really paying attention to the movie anyway, they decided they should pause it and have dinner instead. Rather than going out, Mike ordered a pizza, which they also shared with Will; Mike figured it was only fair, since he had eaten the last of their instant ramen, and now there was nothing to eat in the apartment other than Dustin's "secret" stash of 3 Musketeers bars, which none of the others liked anyway.

By virtue of timing, Will was the first person they informed that they were officially boyfriend and girlfriend now. (This was also because Mike couldn't seem to stop repeating that fact now that he was allowed to say it out loud— *girlfriend*, El was his *girlfriend* now. He was her *boyfriend*. How was this his life?) Will was *zero* surprised but congratulated them anyway, then promptly took his two slices of sausage and pepperoni back with him to his room because, quoting, "I'm supposed to be drawing something ominous and sitting here with

you two making heart-eyes at each other is ruining my forced dark mood."

Mike groaned. So much for lifelong best friends. Even the supposedly nice ones were jerks.

Once they were done eating they retreated back to his room and started the movie up again, promising that they were *definitely* going to watch the whole thing... or at least that they would try really, really hard. For the most part they managed it— not that the movie was bad or anything, but it had been a long day and they were both tired, so apart from a running commentary on how the creatures in question didn't *really* look like that at all and the pros and cons of sacrificing actual scientific facts for spectacle, they weren't as entranced by giant man-eating dinosaurs as they had initially thought they would be.

As the credits rolled, he looked at El to find her asleep against his shoulder, cuddled up against his side with an arm around his waist. Her even breaths tickled his neck and he had to hold back a shudder. Since his arm was draped around her shoulders, he could barely catch a glimpse of his wristwatch in the dim light of the room, but he thought it said 10:23. He probably should ask her what she wanted to do.

"El?" he nudged her gently, not wanting to wake her up abruptly. "Hey, El... it's getting late."

She murmured something under her breath that he didn't quite catch, but then her eyes opened slowly, and it was the cutest thing Mike had ever seen in his life. "What time is it?" she asked as her sleepy gaze roamed around the room as if she couldn't quite place where she was.

"It's nearly ten thirty," he let her know.

Almost seeming surprised by that, she lifted her head off his shoulder, motioning like she intended to get up off the bed. "I should go home," she mumbled, still sounding sleepy.

He was pretty sure she wasn't going to let him walk her back home

just to come all the way back to his dorm, but Mike didn't think she should be making her way back to her apartment on her own at that hour. Especially not if she was still sleepy; it just wouldn't feel right to him.

He touched her forearm lightly to get her attention. "Hey, it's late. Why don't you stay here?" She let him guide her back into bed carefully. "You sleep here and I'll go bunk with Will or something, wake you up in the morning when I'm about to go to class."

"Yeah, okay," she mumbled, clearly too somnolent to protest, as he moved to the side to let her get comfortable. He handed her one of the pillows they'd been using for back support and she promptly laid down on her side, closing her eyes again.

He gazed down at her with a smile for a heartbeat before moving to get up. He carefully closed down the screen on his laptop, put it on the floor beside his bag, and turned off the lamp atop the dresser, intending to walk out quietly to let her sleep. Just as he was about to open the door, however, he heard her speak. "Mike?"

"Yeah?" He looked back at her over his shoulder.

Her eyes were open again, and there was a certain amount of worry in her expression as she looked up at him. A little bit of vulnerability, or that's the way it seemed to him. "Could you... could you stay with me?" she asked him in a small tone. "Just to sleep," she added quickly, not leaving any chance for misinterpretation. "It's just... sometimes when I wake up by myself in unfamiliar places, it... it brings back bad memories."

He knew he was talking about the darker aspects of her childhood, and he mentally kicked himself for not thinking about it earlier. He would've offered to just sleep in Lucas's bed, but he didn't know if Lucas and Dustin were going to make their way back to their dorm tonight or if they were going to power through the night at the library— sometimes the former happened, sometimes the latter.

It's not like he *mind*ed sleeping in the same bed as his now-girlfriend or anything. He would've suggested it from the beginning, but he worried *she* would think it was too soon. If anything, he was touched

that she trusted him that much. If she wasn't bothered by it... "Yeah, of course," he agreed then, letting go of the door handle and approaching the bed once again, sitting down once she scooted back closer to the wall to give him the space to lie down beside her.

As soon as his head hit the pillow, she cuddled up to his side again, an arm around his torso, pressed close from shoulder to knee so that the tip of her fuzzy socks teased his shin, and Mike felt everything inside him just *soften*. He let out a satisfied hum and closed his eyes. It was earlier than his usual bedtime, but he was tired, too; it took just a few minutes in the stillness of the room, pressed up against the warmth of her body, for him to start to drift off.

Come 7:30 am, Mike would be momentarily shaken out of this pleasant little cocoon by Lucas's comically loud stage whisper asking him if he was coming to Calculus class or not, which he would promptly ignore with a vaguely dismissive wave of his hand. Come breakfast time, they'd have to get out of bed anyway as El would inevitably have to respond to sixteen messages from Mama Max demanding that "*Jane Ellen Hopper!* Next time you intend to spend the night at your boyfriend's you are *obligated* to let me know—I've been freaking out all morning, missy!"

That would be later, though. For now, he leaned forward to drop a kiss on the crown of her head. This was the first time he spent the night beside this amazing girl—the first of many, he hoped—and he wanted to revel in the coziness of this embrace for as long as he possibly could. "Goodnight, El," he whispered into the penumbra as he wrapped his arms more securely around her.

"Goodnight, Mike," she replied softly, almost with a sigh, her lips tickling the skin of his neck as slumber tugged at them both.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

And the award for most improved due to period shift goes to... Will Byers' hair! xD Seriously, though, the bowl cuts are the one thing nobody misses from the 80s. And Artsy!Will is such a *mood*, a bowl cut would just ruin it, amirite?

Mike's dorm, Levy Hall, was named after director and producer extraordinaire Shawn Levy, whom I love with all my heart. *Final Destination* is a horror movie franchise from the 2000s where people died in a series of bizarre fate-driven accidents. *The Parent Trap* is a 1961 Disney film where long-lost twins find each other and then swap lives in order to get their divorced parents back together, although Will and El might be more familiar with the 1998 Lindsay Lohan remake.

A quasar is when the supermassive black hole at the center of a galaxy emits energy at very high levels of luminosity. A supernova is when a dying massive star explodes, creating a "new," much brighter star that is only visible temporarily. Mike complains about the way the dinosaurs look because scientists know now that many of the dinosaurs depicted in these types of movies actually were feathered. And while I'm at it, please don't take any of the commentary Mike and El make about the movie here as my own opinion— I haven't even seen *Jurassic World*, so I really don't have the slightest idea if it's entertaining or not. =P

Weird ending, I know. I was initially going to leave it at the PoV break, but I hadn't gotten to write them cuddling and I'm *weak*, so there you go. Also, you don't know how long I've been wanting to use "heart-eyes" to describe the way Mike and El look at each other— I kept holding back because it's not exactly period-accurate to the 80s, so I'm glad this fic finally gave me an excuse to use that term, because it's literally the *perfect* descriptor for these two dorks.

Anyway— look, Ma, I finished a multichapter! That almost *never* happens, so I think I deserve lots of comments on this chapter just for that, hmm? =3 Inspiration allowing, I'll probably go back to the [Quiet Moments](#) oneshots after this, so feel free to keep poking me over at Twitter [@girls\\_are\\_weird](#) or

Tumblr [@girls-are-weird](#) if you'd like to see more of that.

PS: I talked about *Stranger Things* again in [last week's entry](#) of [my vlog](#), trying to speculate about the latest pictures we got from the Atlanta set, so if you're into that, you might want to check it out.